

Fachbereich Sozialwissenschaften

**Coping with Precarisation.  
Employees' Responses to Flexibility and Control in  
Milanese Large Scale Retailing.**

**Dissertation**

zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde

durch den

Promotionsausschuss Dr. rer. pol.

der Universität Bremen

vorgelegt von

**Kristin Carls**

Bremen, 21.01.2011

GutachterInnen

**Prof. Dr. Karin Gottschall**

**Prof. Dr. Lothar Peter**

# Contents

Acknowledgments .....	5
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>PART ONE: THEORY .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>2. Theoretical background .....</b>	<b>14</b>
2.1 Social theoretical background: Conflicts and contradictions as central analytical categories .....	14
2.2 First subject-theoretical background: Critical psychology and its dialectic understanding of the subject .....	19
2.3 Second subject-theoretical background: Socio-structural, biographical, power-immanent and identity-related positionings .....	25
2.4 Labour process theory and a practice-oriented understanding of labour .....	32
2.5 Conclusion: management strategies, conflict experiences and coping practices as levels of empirical analysis .....	37
<b>PART TWO: CONTEXT .....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>3. Flexibilisation and subjectification of labour: The state of art in labour sociology .....</b>	<b>45</b>
3.1 Social transformations from Fordism to Post-Fordism .....	46
3.2 Flexibilisation of employment and labour markets .....	52
3.2.1 ‘A-typical’ employment and its critique .....	52
3.2.2 General processes of precarisation .....	57
3.3 Subjectification and indirect labour control .....	61
3.3.1 The German debate on the ‘subjectification’ of labour .....	62
3.3.2 Critical assessment: self-regulation as a general requirement .....	66
3.3.3 Excuse: Post-Operaist analysis of immaterial labour .....	73
3.4 Subject-oriented research: employees’ experiences and coping practices .....	75
3.4.1 Subject-oriented research on the employment relationship .....	77
3.4.2 Subject-oriented research on the labour process .....	87
3.4.3 Subject-oriented research on retail labour .....	105
3.5 Conclusion: open questions and focal points for the empirical research .....	114

<b>4. The research field: Retail labour in Italy</b>	<b>121</b>
4.1 Transformations in the retail sector: Internationalisation and concentration	121
4.2 Transformations in the Italian economy and retailing: Flexible specialisation and late modernisation	123
4.3 Transformations in Italian labour market regulations: Enforced liberalisation and flexibilisation	125
4.4 The Italian labour relations system: ‘Organised decentralisation’ and unions’ losing power positions in times of precarisation	135
4.5 Social movements and precarisation: Intelligence Precaria and the Punto San Precario	146
4.6 Conclusion: Selecting Milanese large scale retailing as a research field	151
 <b>PART THREE: EMPIRICS</b>	 <b>154</b>
<b>5. Empirical approach</b>	<b>154</b>
5.1 Data sources, interview access, and sample structure	154
5.2 The method and tools of problem-centred interviewing	163
5.3 Interview analysis using ideologically critical discourse analysis	169
 <b>6. Milanese large scale retailing</b>	 <b>174</b>
6.1 Flexibility regulations, employment structure, and labour control in Milanese large scale retailing	175
6.1.1 Patterns of numerical, temporal, and functional flexibility	175
6.1.2 Flexible labour processes and normative control	185
6.2 Flexibility and labour control in detail: four case studies	193
6.2.1 Firm G	193
6.2.2 Firm C	196
6.2.3 Firm I	199
6.2.4 Firm D	202
6.2.5 Case comparison	205
 <b>7. Individual work experiences and fields of conflict</b>	 <b>209</b>
7.1 Employee experiences of flexibilisation and precarisation	211
7.1.1 Conflicts regarding the employment status: Experiences of flexibilisation and precarisation	211
7.1.2 The conflicts of individualised informal flexibility regulations: Precarising experiences of forced availability	215
7.1.3 In detail: Conflicts regarding work times	218
7.1.4 In detail: Conflicts concerning functional flexibility, work tasks, and qualifications	221

7.2 Employee experiences of labour control and subjectification .....	226
7.2.1 Direct control: Conflictive hierarchical supervision, internalisation, and claims for autonomy .....	226
7.2.2 Control over customer service and the limits of emotional labour .....	228
7.2.3 Indirect control and the criticism of participatory management strategies as fake .....	232
7.2.4 Indirect labour control, individualisation, and lacking collective resources .....	236
7.3 Generalisations: Common patterns in employees' conflict experiences .....	241
7.3.1 Generalised gradual processes of precarisation .....	242
7.3.2 Generalised requirements and aspirations in self-regulation and participation ....	247
7.4 Differentiations: Firm differences and employee characteristics .....	253
7.4.1 Strong conflict experiences in firm G .....	253
7.4.2 Strong conflict experiences for older employees in firm I .....	255
7.4.3 Strong participatory conflicts in firm D .....	256
7.4.4 Limited conflict experiences in firm C .....	259
7.4.5 Limited conflict experiences for young employees in firm I .....	263
7.4.6 Final comparison .....	266
7.5 Summary .....	273
 <b>8. Individual coping practices .....</b>	 <b>277</b>
8.1 Adaptation .....	279
8.1.1 Rule internalisation, good work, and fair exchange .....	280
8.1.2 Practices of separation and distinction .....	292
8.1.3 Transferring conflicts .....	300
8.1.4 Conflict reduction .....	306
8.2 Appropriation of meaning, border drawing and conflictive negotiation .....	312
8.2.1 Appropriation of meaning: service knowledge and personalisation .....	313
8.2.2 Border drawing between the firm and the self: rejecting indirect control and subjectification .....	321
8.2.3 Border drawing between one's rights and firm interests: rejecting labour requirements and direct control .....	327
8.2.4 Appropriation of work conditions: conflictive negotiation .....	337
8.3 Conclusion: About the social contextualisation of coping practices .....	343
8.3.1 Summary: The contradictory character of coping practices and their cumulative distribution .....	343
8.3.2 Contextualisation 1: The socially grounded character of coping practices in capitalist society .....	352
8.3.3 Contextualisation 2: Neoliberal performance concepts and power relations at the workplace .....	357
8.3.4 Contextualisation 3: Employees' socio-structural positioning .....	364
 <b>9. Collective coping practices .....</b>	 <b>369</b>
9.1 Introduction: Subjective relevance of collective agency and interest representation ..	369
9.2 Participation in institutional interest representation 1: Limited participation and anti-union pressures for temporary employees .....	372
9.3 Participation in institutional interest representation 2: Passive participation and lacking cognitive resources .....	374

9.4. Participation in institutional interest representation 3: Individualised concepts of collective support and struggles .....	380
9.5 Participation in institutional interest representation 4: Active participation and collective struggle attitudes .....	383
9.6 Collective agency on the shop floor: Personalised and privatised forms of daily solidarity.....	390
9.7 Conclusion.....	397
9.7.1 Distribution of coping patterns.....	398
9.7.2 Lacking collective capacities and their social conditioning.....	402
<b>10. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>406</b>
10.1 Summary: Flexibilisation and control, conflicts and coping in large scale retailing .	407
10.2 Outlook: Possible steps for enhancing collective action potential .....	422
 Bibliography.....	 430
List of Tables.....	444
Appendix 1: List of interviewed employees .....	445
Appendix 2: Interview guideline for the employee interviews .....	446
Appendix 3: Additional interview quotes .....	452
Erklärung.....	462

## Acknowledgments

The workers and shop stewards who participated in the interviews are the very first persons I want to thank for their contribution to this work; though, due to anonymity reasons, I can not reveal their names here. Without their readiness to offer me time and insights into their work and live, without their courage to talk about everyday experiences and also conflictive issues, this research would not have been possible. Special thanks in this respect goes to those who helped me to get in touch with these work realities: Rino Sorrentino, Sergio Fassina, Stefano Franzoni and Angelo Tognoli. It was impressive to see the personal energy you did put into this.

Next to the people in the field, there are all those who contributed to the process of preparing and writing this dissertation. Prof. Dr. Karin Gottschall and Prof. Dr. Lothar Peter supervised it all these years and I want to thank them for all the support and advice they offered me. Prof. Dr. Ida Regalia readily introduced me at the Department of Labour and Welfare Studies at the University of Milan and took care of my work during the year of my stay there. Iris Novak and Victor Rego Diaz closely observed the whole evolution of this work. To an important part it is due to their repeated comments, criticisms and encouragements, and the collective space we created together that it is finished today. I am really looking forward to keeping on our cooperation in the future! The same holds true also for the stimulating exchanges I have had with Tilo König, Anja Paulsen, Emiliana Armano, Raffaele Sciortino, Elanor Colleoni and Cristina Morini. The best about all this support is that not only this dissertation, but also friendships did grow and evolve. There are more people who helped me in particular moments with their knowledge and contacts, ideas and questions: Isabelle Ferreras, Andrea Pietrantoni, Andrea Fumagalli, Gabriele Ballarino, Dario Iamele, Mimmo Vitale, Annalisa Murgia, Valeria Graziano, Ralf Brodesser, and Dagmar Engelken. Many moments of discussion I have shared with the colleagues from my stream cohort at the BIGSSS, Oana Cinca, Claudia Ruddat, Christian Möllmann and Dong-Ho Jang, especially in the beginning of this work. At the end, Stephanie Vogel did a big job in proof-reading all these pages. I am particularly grateful also to the BIGSSS and the University of Bremen for the generous financial and organisational support received.

Talking about collective spaces, I want to recognise the contribution of the three political collectives I have been active in during the last years: Avanti, chainworkers and nine2five. Sometimes even without knowing much about this dissertation, and sometimes also in conflictive ways (causing time conflicts for the author), all these people and shared activities

have been important to this work because they gave it a collective anchorage and a social sense, a counter-point to the often isolated and secluded work on a doctoral thesis. Important in practical terms has been also the support from Gisa Rehwinkel, Axel Stüning and Maria-Magdalena Kreutzkamp. Finally, there are all the friends, partners, flatmates, officemates and family that have been close to me in these years and whose everyday presence has been crucial. Thank you to you all for having shared this time with me.

# 1. Introduction

Hyper flexible work times, extremely short part-time, unstable contracts, low wages, strict control and supervision, quick work rhythms, stress, rationalisation and de-qualification, standardised codes for dressing, behaviour and communication, the obligation to always smile and to render your face and self to the company image: In a word, retailing can be associated with highly precarious work conditions, invasive and authoritarian labour control, and enforced exploitation for lots of reasons. But, is this the whole picture? What about participatory management strategies, or contradictory requirements of self-regulation and authentic emotional involvement? How do these contribute to an effective labour control, precarisation, and consent production? What about potentially liberating aspects of flexibilisation or of employees' own demands for control and autonomy, responsibility and recognition? And, last but not least, what about capacities of collective agency that could support the realisation of such liberating potentials and aspirations? These are some of the starting questions of this study. Its aim is to investigate retail labour in light of current transformations of labour processes. More concretely, it deals with retail employees' experiences of precarisation and subjectification, as central expressions of these transformations.

Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, two developments in the world of wage work have become prominent in sociological debate: on the one hand the precarisation of work and employment conditions, on the other the subjectification of labour control. Precarisation refers to a growing level of insecurity, uncertainty, and instability in employees' (work) lives. Originally, this was largely discussed in terms of 'atypical' employment that is growing at the margins of the labour market. That is, precarious labour was, first and foremost, defined as a deviation from the so-called Fordist 'standard': Full-time, lifelong employment with stable work times that is regulated by collective bargaining and covered under public social security schemes. But, more recently, the debate has widened as precarisation empirically touches upon growing parts of labour, including the core of the former Fordist workforce.

Subjectification indicates a shift in management's strategies towards more indirect forms of labour control. Such indirect control is an attempt to increase employees' self-control and to enhance their (self-)responsibility. Its goal is to better mobilise employees' motivation, to allow for a growing flexibilisation of labour processes, and to reduce margins of resistance, which Fordist standardisation and hierarchical supervision have encountered. Regarding the



debate on precarisation, such new forms of labour control were originally associated with specific parts of the workforce: This time, these forms have spread especially among the most advanced, highly qualified sectors of knowledge work. In contrast, more recent research points to precarisation among less qualified types of work and Neo-Taylorist forms of work organisation.

Both of these processes of precarisation and subjectification are of high social relevance. Increasing precarisation produces social fragmentation, exclusion, and a deterioration of living conditions for a growing part of the workforce. Growing subjectification fosters new forms and degrees of (self-)exploitation, due to the increased internalisation of labour control that it produces. Both together put into question existing forms of collective labour regulation. Yet, simultaneously, growing workforce responsabilisation and flexibilisation might also enhance margins for employees' participation and self-determination. In a word, the current change in labour relations appears to be a highly contradictory, ambiguous social process.

The empirical field chosen here for the investigation of these ambiguous developments at the level of daily labour processes is large scale retailing in the Italian city of Milan. In the Italian context, current pressures of transformation and precarisation can be expected to be particularly strong. During Fordism, the Italian labour market was characterised by relatively strong labour rights and rather rigid employment regulations.<sup>1</sup> In the last decade, it has witnessed a particularly strong and quick liberalisation. Employment flexibility was increased and a large variety of flexible and so-called 'para-subordinate'<sup>2</sup> forms of employment were introduced. Meanwhile, the welfare regime has maintained its limited, family-oriented character and an increasing part of the population is, thus, left without any public social security support.

The configuration of collective forces that might potentially oppose these processes is also of interest in this case. Since the end of the Second World War, the history of Italian labour

---

<sup>1</sup> The most recurrent examples are the dismissal protections, which are regulated in article 18 of the Italian Labour Statute. In firms with more than fifteen employees, any dismissal of permanent employees is bound to a serious negligence of contractual obligations by the employee, and to a critical economic performance of the firm. However, even with these restrictions, dismissal remains possible in various situations, such as for economic reasons or a reduced need for specific work tasks. It should be underlined that small businesses with less than fifteen employees play a particularly important role in the Italian economy. Employment protection in Fordist times therefore also covered only a limited part of the workforce. The Italian labour market might have been framed by relatively strong labour rights. But, at the same time, the regulatory system as a whole has always been marked by a low degree of institutionalisation. The dual bargaining system especially allows for important margins of differentiation and flexibilisation at the micro level of company bargaining and in-house labour relations.

<sup>2</sup> "Para subordinate employment" refers to all sorts of (often pseudo) self-employment that are located in an intermediate space between autonomous entrepreneurship and dependent wage labour.

relations has been marked by strong labour struggles and high degrees of unionisation. Though this regards mostly the industrial labour sectors, unionisation has been high in European comparison also in the retail sector. In the current period, unions have had to face an immense loss of bargaining powers and power positions, which might be experienced as even stronger in contrast to their traditional strength. With this situation, and especially in the metropolitan context of Milan, some social movement initiatives on the issue of precarisation and some employee self-organisation outside of the union system are growing. This specific configuration of collective forces makes the Italian and Milanese context a particularly interesting field for investigating the prospects of collective action potential.

In terms of retailing, this is a sector that appears to be destined for the development and analysis of precarious and flexible forms of labour. Not only recently, flexibilised work times and (minor) part-time employment are the norm here. Today, their presence is even increasing, not least in reaction to ever increasing opening times and competition. In this sector, the internationalisation and globalisation of the last decades has produced particularly strong processes of capital concentration and high levels of competition. This competition exists primarily at the two levels of prices and service quality. Price competition, first of all, concerns the labour costs. Current transformations, thus, produce strong pressures of rationalisation and increased, more effective labour exploitation. At the same time, enhancing the service quality requires an important degree of employee commitment. As with other frontline service, retailing therefore can be expected to be characterised by a specific mix of direct and indirect forms of labour control. Hence, it offers a promising research field for combining the analysis of both precarisation and subjectification. That is, the goal is to search for linkages between these two ambiguous sides of the current labour change, as well as to understand their common origins and joint contributions to the restructuring of flexible labour processes and control, rather than attributing them to different sectors and types of labour.

In a European comparison, Italian retailing has experienced a rather late but all the more incisive and pronounced modernisation. There are, thus, additional sector-specific pressures for change. A large scale and quick entrance of foreign multinational companies has produced a complete restructuring of the Italian retail market, which had still been dominated by small scale neighbourhood stores in the 1990s. As a result of this quick internationalisation, large scale outlets have spread, and market saturation and price competition are high. So far, this development has been concentrated in Northern Italy and especially in the bigger cities. Among these, the province of Milan constitutes one of the focal areas of change. Not only in

Italy, but also in a wider European context, the increase of large scale outlets represents a core trend in the sector's current transformation process. These reasons together determined the selection of Milanese large scale retailing<sup>3</sup> as the research field for this empirical investigation.

On the backdrop of this national and sector-specific context of the current labour change, the concrete level of analysis chosen here is that of employees' everyday work experiences. The central research interest lies in how retail employees themselves live and realise their work conditions. The first aim is to illuminate subjective experiences of precarisation and subjectification, which go beyond the dichotomist distinction of so-called 'standard' and 'atypical' employment. For this purpose, the large variety of different, gradual forms of precarisation and subjectification will be rendered visible that can be expected to emerge from employees' everyday experiences. This requires examining generalised experiences precarisation and subjectification that regard all employees, as well as determining differences in these experiences and their distribution across different employee groups.

Second, in analysing these employee experiences, particular stress is put on the functioning of labour control: On how workplace consent and/or conflict are produced, how management strategies of flexibilisation and subjectification operate together, and how employees' own acting and thinking contributes to such consent and conflict production. This insistence in labour control, consent, and conflict is not an end in itself. Instead, the goal is to inquire into employees' agency potential: In their capacities to face and act within, but also to shape, change, and influence their labour conditions and realise their own rights and interests - also in the face of growing vulnerability and increasing self-exploitation pressures.

Particularly for this latter research question, the ambiguous, contradictory character of current labour change is of central interest - as a precarising, social vulnerability enhancing, but also potentially liberating, participation, and self-regulation fostering process. Analysis of employees' everyday experiences, thus, insists in daily conflict experiences that arise from this contradictory character - and, subsequently, on employees' cognitive and practical coping practices in front of these conflicts. That is, the focus is on how employees face experienced labour requirements and potentially emerging problems and conflicts, what kind of common sense they make use of to give meaning to these experiences, and how different common sense patterns sustain different, more or less conflictive coping practices as well as different

---

<sup>3</sup> Large scale retailing refers to particularly big outlet structures. Its definition is far from unanimous. According to Italian law, large scale outlets are outlets with more than 2.500m<sup>2</sup>. In a broader understanding, this category usually also comprises 'organised' large scale retailing: horizontally (one firm with lots of single outlet points) or vertically (uniting outlets, wholesalers, and possible also producers) integrated companies with a series of small shops. The establishment of such large scale structures represents an overall trend in the sector.

degrees of concrete agency potentials. Beyond the level of individual experiences, collective coping practices and collective action potential are also included in this investigation to understand their development and significance in today's increasingly individualised labour relations.

In order to engage into such a subject-oriented analysis of everyday practices and labour control, nineteen qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews with retail employees were carried out in four selected Milanese retail companies. These were complemented by 25 background interviews with union representatives and shop stewards which were meant to assess the current state work organisation, flexibilisation and labour control. To gain a better understanding of the overall development of the sector, these background interviews cover a wider set of eleven companies (the four case studies plus seven further firms) as well as four union secretaries from the regional retail branches of all three main confederations.<sup>4</sup> The sample of employee interviews, in turn, contains a large variety of employment situations, including permanent and temporary, full-time and part-time employees. It is, thus, particularly suitable to inquire into various different experiences of precarisation and subjectification as they occur within and across diverse types of employment.

The presentation of this qualitative empirical study is organised as follows: In a first step, the theoretical frame for this analysis is explained. Chapter two presents the categories used for a subject-oriented, contradiction-focussed, dialectic analysis of labour processes. With reference to the Marxist current of critical psychology, coping practices and action potential are proposed as central categories for investigating employees' acting and thinking in terms of social (labour) requirements (2.1 and 2.2). In addition, further theoretical concepts from the works of Bourdieu, Schütz, Foucault, and Hall are briefly referred to as complementing this subject-oriented frame (2.3). Translating this general research perspective into the field of labour, finally, the combination of labour process theory with a practice-oriented concept of labour is discussed (2.4), and conclusions for the empirical research process are developed (2.5).

---

<sup>4</sup> In Italy there are three main national union confederations that are distinguished along political lines: CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro) represents the most left-wing among the three confederations (once connected to the communist party). CISL (Confederazione Italiana Sindacati dei Lavoratori) was historically linked to the Christian Democrats, and UIL (Unione Italiana del Lavoro) to the socialist and social-democratic parties. Their retail sections are FILCAMS (Federazione Italiana Lavoratori Commercio, Turismo e Servizi), which belongs to the CGIL, FISASCAT (Federazione Italiana Sindacati Addetti Servizi Commerciali Affini Turismo) as part of CISL, and UILTUCS (Unione Italiana Lavoratori Turismo Commercio e Servizi) within UIL.

Next, chapter three and four describe the social context in which the analysis of retail labour is situated. Chapter three gives an overview of the current transformations in the world of work. In a first instance, labour change is situated within the overall process of social transformations from a Fordist to a Post-Fordist mode of production which take place under neoliberal hegemony (3.1). Second, the sociological state of the art regarding current labour change is presented. After the discussion of central approaches to employment flexibilisation (3.2) and subjectification (3.3), a specific section refers to subject-oriented labour studies and, in this, addresses the specific field of retail labour (3.4). In conclusion, open questions and focal points for the following empirical research in large scale retailing are summarised (3.5). Chapter four gives a first insight into the concrete research field of retail labour and, especially, into the Italian context conditions. Following a short introduction into the general development trends in the European retail sector (4.1), specificities of economic transformation and retail modernisation in Italy and Milan are addressed (4.2). Moreover, the Italian regulatory context of labour market politics and welfare regime (4.3), as well as the configuration of collective actors are presented. As regards the latter, both the labour relations system (4.4), and some activities of social movements in the field of precarious labour (4.5) are considered. A final section of this chapter sums up the reasons for choosing this particular research field for the analysis of employees' coping practices in face of precarisation and subjectification (4.6).

On the backdrop of these conceptual and contextual reflections, the empirical side of this study is introduced. Chapter five presents the empirical approach used in this investigation. For this purpose, a brief overview of the sample is given, and the strategies and problems of field access are discussed (5.1). Next, problem-centred interviewing is introduced as a contradiction and subject-oriented method of data collection (5.2). Regarding data analysis, ideologically critical discourse analysis is utilised as a tool to investigate subjects' common sense as a socially grounded coping practice (5.3).

The empirical results are discussed in four distinct chapters. Consecutively, these refer to current management strategies of work organisation and labour control, employees' everyday experiences of the resulting work conditions, their individual, and finally, their collective coping practices in the face of these conditions. Chapter six analyses the current state of flexibilisation and subjectification in large scale retailing in Milan (6.1), and specifically in the selected case studies in four multinational retail companies (6.2). It thus investigates the labour requirements and work conditions that employees have to face, and sets the basis for the analysis of their everyday practices. Chapter seven, eight and nine, finally, refer to these

everyday practices themselves. Chapter seven starts out by questioning employees' narrations about everyday work with regard to the open or latent conflict experiences they contain. This is done in two steps, with respect to management's strategies of flexibilisation (7.1) and labour control (7.2). Looking at individual coping practices in the face of these conflicts (chapter eight), different though overlapping patterns of adaptation (8.1), appropriation, border drawing, rejection, and conflictive negotiation of labour requirements (8.2) are distinguished. On the level of collective coping (chapter nine), finally, participation in and attitudes towards institutional forms of interest representation (9.1-9.5), as well as daily lived solidarity and collective agency at the shop floor (9.6), are investigated. Eventually, the concluding chapter ten offers a summary of the empirical results (10.1) and, as an outlook, engages in a discussion of how the encountered limited action potential and employees' consequently reduced possibilities to realise their own rights and interests within current retail labour processes could be increased (10.2).

## PART ONE: THEORY

### 2. Theoretical background

This chapter develops the theoretical framework for the empirical research on employees' experiences of flexibilisation and subjectification. This task entails four steps. First, an introduction is provided for the underlying concept of conflictive and contradictory social development processes (2.1). Following from that, the subject-theoretical categories relevant for this contradiction-focussed research perspective are presented in more detail (2.2 and 2.3). Next, these categories are applied specifically to the labour process level. This is done by proposing a more specific theoretical frame for this field of analysis, which is built on labour process theory and a Marxist, practice-related concept of labour (2.4). Finally, some conclusions are drawn with regard to the empirical analysis, its steps and focal points (2.5).

#### *2.1 Social theoretical background: Conflicts and contradictions as central analytical categories*

With regard to the issue being considered empirically – employees' daily work experiences – this research places the analysis of conflicts and contradictions at the core. On the level of social theory, such a proceeding is based on a Marxist understanding of the social world and its development processes as marked and structured by contradictions, interest conflicts, and power relations.

In Marxist terms, competing interests and conflicts between different social groups and classes are thought to emerge from the historical division of labour, which have characterised human social development (Marx 1996, MECW 35: 51ff; Marx/Engels 1975, MECW 5: 32ff; Holzkamp 1985). Consequently, each social formation is marked by historically specific, conflicting forms of social relations. In this, competing interests and conflicts result from the diverse ways and positions in and from the way different groups participate in the production and reproduction of social life, including the various political and cultural-ideological forms by which this participation is framed.

Taking such divergent, competing interests as a starting point, social relations (both in the sense of interactions between individuals or social groups, and social structures and regulations) necessarily appear as conflictive. Yet, conflicts do not have to be open and visible. They might become neutralised and invisible through political and cultural regulation.

Within capitalist society, one central interest conflict in terms of labour relations lies in employers' contested ability to control employees' human labour power (Marx/Engels 1976, MECW 6:477ff). One of the central points of contention concerns the relationship between maximising profit and life interests, as well as their respective enforcement within the social production process.<sup>5</sup> This conflict is fought not only within the labour process, but is politically and culturally framed and regulated. That is, not only the distribution of power and control within the labour process is decisive. Instead, forms and outcomes of conflict equally depend on each conflict party's influence on political regulations and cultural frames – and thus, on the capacity to externalise conflicts and to organise interests collectively in order to gain power positions, to shape social discourses, and to advance specific conflict solutions or externalisations (Gramsci 1995:1244ff).

Due to this conflictive and power structured character of social relations, social development itself is historically contingent, non-concurrent, and thus, a contradictory process.<sup>6</sup> Recognising contradictions within social development assumes that contrasting phenomena can exist simultaneously. Only on this basis can society be understood as both: As a permanently changing and actively changed outcome of its conflicts, and at the same time, structured by substantial power relations that can be altered only with a long-term perspective. Thinking in terms of contradictions and conflicts is crucial in order to grasp and analyse changing power relations as driving forces, as well as products of social development processes. Moreover, it is this kind of contradiction-focussed thinking, which makes social change possible in the first place.

Regarding the subject agency, this concept of social development implies a dialectic understanding of subjects as historical actors: People “make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx 1972, MEW 8:

---

<sup>5</sup> This is a very simplified way of representing the social world. Just as the conflict between labour and capital is only one of society's conflicts, the conflict lines within this field are also manifold and far from dualist. As the additional explanations regarding subject practices suggest, employees' interests, their meaning constructions, and agency can themselves take contradictory forms. To give just one example, as they act within capitalist society, they might also adhere to profit interests, or more precisely, have an interest in the firm's economic success to maintain their employment positions.

<sup>6</sup> Instead of such a contingent understanding of social development, one strand of Marxist thinking uses the concept of contradictions and contradictory social relations to insist on supposedly necessary dynamics of social development. While losing sight of subjects that act, shape, and change society, social development then results as an automatic consequence of contradictions arising from the relations and the forces of productions. Such an economic argument is clearly not what is intended here. In contrast, it is the contingent understanding of social development processes and the focus on contradictions, interest conflicts, and power relations, which is considered as inspiring, not least because of its consequences for subject theory, and the perspective of social change that it offers.



115; English translation from [www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/h/i.htm](http://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/h/i.htm)). Assessing an individual's forms of living, acting, and thinking, and the linkages between social development and subject agency, requires revealing the coping practices subjects develop in order to face social living conditions and conflicts, and by which they become capable of acting in these conditions. A subject-oriented analysis necessarily has a double task: On the one hand, it needs to reconstruct the specific historical constellations of actors, interests, and power relations within the observed empirical field. On the other, it has to ask for a subject's self-positioning within these contradictory and conflictive social relations and development processes. The following sections elaborate on such a dialectic understanding of subject agency, in general, and within the labour process, specifically.

Before, it is useful to add some remarks about the research interests, the research perspective, and the respective epistemological orientations, which insist on a dialectic understanding of social development processes and inform the selected subject-oriented approach.

The empirical investigation of employees' coping practices and their action potential in the face of changing, flexibilised, and subjectified conditions of work and employment is undertaken with the aim of learning about possible emancipatory social development. That is, analysing subject agency is not pursued as an end in itself, but motivated by an interest in human development potentials. Such development potentials are defined here from an ethical standpoint: As developments that enhance all subjects' self-determined participation in the social, thus collective process of producing, reproducing, and developing human forms of life. Or, as increasing the collective disposal of subjects over their living conditions, and thus, their freedom to choose the realisation of their own human development potentials.

In this, the claim for such emancipatory development potentials is not derived from any abstract normative principles, but rather from the typical human capacity of conscious agency and active shaping of one's own conditions of existence (Holzkamp 1985: 243). What is of interest from this perspective on a concrete empirical level are possibilities of social development as they are entailed in the current historical state of the productive forces - and as they are potentially blocked or enhanced by the existing social relations of production (Projekt Automation und Qualifikation 1987: 19).<sup>7</sup> In other words, regarding a subject's

---

<sup>7</sup> In the words of the Projekt Automation Qualifikation (PAQ), such potentials represent "requirements of development:" claims, which would need to be achieved in order to fully realise typical human potentials of development. Yet, the issue at stake here is not only considering a full realisation of development potentials as representing a 'really' human state of development. But rather to claim each subject's own decision power over the (non)enhancement and (non)realisation of his/her potentials. The important input of the PAQ here is to search for such potentials as always already entailed (in embryonic form) in the respective historical, conflictive,

agency, the analysis needs to investigate both opportunities and obstacles in the development of a subject's action potential.

On an epistemological level, a dialectic concept of subject agency requires a specific approach towards hypotheses (Projekt Automation und Qualifikation 1980: 21ff). Given the understanding of social development as a contingent, interest, and power-structured process, the way it is described here, scientific analysis can only investigate opportunities of (subject) agency and (social) development. Specifically, any to be analysed prospects for and constraints of a subject's action potential or of respective social development processes are to be perceived as historical possibilities. They do not constitute necessities or automatisms, but they depend on their (conflictive) enactment by historical actors.

Therefore, the aim of the research process can not be to test hypotheses as indicators of fixed causal relations, rules, or mechanisms of social processes. Instead, hypotheses are conceived of here as theoretical terms derived from previous knowledge and presumptions about the social world and/or the specific topic of interest. The theoretical terms (such as 'coping practices') are used as analytical tools and are part of the applied method.<sup>8</sup> They are employed to learn about unknown, historically contingent facts, developments, and relations. Consequently, they are not tested directly, as right or wrong, or previously available statements about causalities, but rather with regard to their usefulness for interrogating an unknown issue and pursuing a specific research question. A motivated choice for distinct concepts is far from arbitrary. Selected methods and theories must be adequate with respect to the object of analysis and the research aim: They have to speak to the topic that is being explored. In this case, they must be appropriate for assessing the dialectic articulation of power and subjectivity within the labour process, a subject's coping practices, and potential agency options in the face of flexibilised, subjectified work and employment conditions. Finally, they must also help to discover prospects for enlarged action potential and emancipatory social development.

Such a research interest is exactly this: An interest, resulting in a particular procedure and choice of methods and theories. It entails taking a position that is always political, as it contributes to the production of distinct, interest-framed worldviews. If no authoritative point

---

and contradictory social relations - and not only as external, moralist, particularistic or else arbitrary aspirations, and /or as exclusively negated by a current regime of exploitation.

<sup>8</sup> As Holzkamp argues, there is a need for developing abstract, de-mythologizing, critical terms as tools of analysis in order to go beyond the immediate character of meaning constructions both within common sense and scientific research. These terms have to be themselves historically positioned and situated (Holzkamp 1975: 49).

of reference for any truth claims can exist (as post-structural analysis teaches), there is no scientific knowledge and no contribution to scientific debate that is not also located within power structures. Or, as Gramsci puts it, we can think of the social world and respective worldviews only as made by human beings. The idea of (scientific) objectivity is also produced by human beings, and thus, by historical social subjects. It constitutes nothing other than one possible worldview. Science, in this perspective, necessarily is always ideological – in Gramsci's terms a philosophical production of distinct worldviews. Simultaneously, every individual, too, has to be considered as a 'philosopher'. That is, by making sense of the social world and his/her requirements and opportunities of agency, everybody produces and adheres to specific, selected, (more or less) complex worldviews, which are reflected in each subject's common sense (Gramsci 1995: 1268, 1375, 1412, 1446ff).

Recognising this relativity, the power structured character of and the intimate connection between scientific knowledge and common sense, does not reduce the possibility for ideologically critical analysis.<sup>9</sup> Instead, it increases the need for critical and criticisable reflections about the social positioning, the constitution and the interrelations of theoretical and empirical claims and meanings. Crucially, the existing theoretical knowledge employed and the research interests pursued must be made explicit. As such, they can be assessed and questioned with regard to their 'correctness'. But, first, any such arguments about correctness are themselves filtered by social positionings. Second, such criticism of theoretical concepts refers to another, previous level of analysis, which is different from empirical investigation itself. It can neither be carried out on the empirical level, nor can any useful confrontation about empirical results take place as long as differences about the theoretical terms on which empirical investigation is based are not outspoken and resolved (Holzkamp 1975: 27f). Regarding the outcomes of empirical analysis itself, as Sennet puts it: "In qualitative research, (...) 'proof' is a matter of the demonstration of logical relationship; the qualitative researcher has laid on him the burden of plausibility" (Sennett 1976: 43; quoted from Korczynski 2003: 74).

The analytical focus on contradictions can be a helpful tool for such an ideologically critical endeavour. On the levels of both theoretical concepts and common sense, this constitutes an

---

<sup>9</sup> Ideology is understood here in its double sense as an image of the world and as a false universalism. Without implying any determinist vision of social development or objective class interests, it is considered useful and necessary in order to demonstrate the dominance that is at play within each process of producing hegemony, and to enable differentiating between material reality and power relations on the one hand and their discursive construction and representation on the other. This point is crucial for the critical assessment of retail employees' coping practices in the face of flexibilisation – when it comes to making sense of gaps between interpretations and meanings of reality offered by dominant discourses and actual opportunities of participation in this reality, between (management's) universalist rhetoric of integration and (employees') experiences of exclusion, fragmentation, and difference.

instrument to counter dualist, reductionist, as well as immanent and/or one-sided, and particularistic ways of thinking and arguing. It helps to unmask unnamed power relations, - as they occur for example in theoretical concepts based on supposedly necessary reductions of complexity. On the side of theory, using dialectic concepts adds coherence to the scientific approach. If social processes (as research objects) are understood as marked by and developed through contradictions then the scientific knowledge production itself has to reflect these contradictions. On the side of subject-analysis, an ideologically critical stance is a precondition for rendering visible contradictions that are apparently self-evident to common sense and making this accessible to criticism. Analysis, therefore, requires taking a critical distance from empirically encountered subjects, and not least inquiring into how their common sense is interwoven with hegemonic social discourses.

## ***2.2 First subject-theoretical background: Critical psychology and its dialectic understanding of the subject***

If social development is described here as contradictory and conflictive, it is in fact conceived of as a question of hegemony. Outcomes of interest conflicts and social developments depend on both coercive power and the production of consent (Gramsci 1995: 1249, 1267). Gramsci develops such an understanding of hegemony both with regards to the theory of the state and the subject. On the level of the state, hegemony is achieved not only through the state's monopoly over coercive power resources, but also through producing consent within civil society. It relies on cultural regulations as well as on the integration of civil society actors. Regarding the level of subject agency, hegemony passes through a subject's common sense. In Gramsci's terms, common sense indicates a subject's meaning constructions and worldviews, which guide their daily actions. The latter is conceptualised as a subject's active confrontation and coping with their conditions of existence - or, more precisely, with the requirements of thinking and acting emanating from these context conditions: "One's own worldview is an answer to problems posed by reality" (Gramsci 1995: 1376; translation K.C.). Common sense is both an input and an output of coping practices: It is produced, reproduced, and/or transformed through a subject's daily confrontation with and reaction to their living conditions. Additionally, once acquired and established, common sense serves as a resource for further coping processes as it offers a frame for orientation and interpreting current agency requirements and new situations (Krauss 1994b: 9).

The conditions of existence subjects have to face comprise both natural and social conditions, as these influence possibilities and impossibilities of living. Essentially, a subject's opportunities for ensuring his or her existence depends on the actual capacities the individual has to transform nature into useful provisions for life. Within society, these capacities depend on both the development of productive forces and social relations of production – and on a subject's access to the available means of production. That is, a subject's conditions of existence are structured by social power relations and the distribution of material and cognitive resources these produce. In terms of hegemony and beyond the coercive force of social structures, the previously highlighted importance of cultural regulations, ideological calls, and therein entailed offers of social sense, identification, participation, recognition, and legitimation all result from their function as means of consent production.

In the following, categories from the German school of critical psychology are used to conceptualise more precisely a subject's coping practices in the face of these conditions of existence. Again, if social relations and developments are contradictory, then the coping practices of subjects must be conflictive as well. Conflicts can be expected to arise between agency requirements and a subject's own interests and motivations, or between those intrinsic interests that can be realised together with the fulfilment of social requirements and those that can not. A subject's everyday acting and thinking, thus, appears not simply as coping with context conditions, but as coping with contradictions. It is to be understood as an active, interest-driven, and goal-oriented practice – and as a subject's own achievement rather than as a passive, automatic, or pre-determined process. Its necessary goal is the acquisition of action potentials (“Handlungsfähigkeit”, translation K.C.) - that is, of capacities to face one's conditions of existence and to reproduce and maintain one's own life within a social context (Krauss 1994b: 5ff).

Coping with contradictions and acquiring action potentials presupposes that decisions are taken between conflicting interests and opportunities for agency. In fact, as a result of such a decision process, each coping practice can produce specific action potentials. But, it concurrently poses limits to such capacities on other levels, or with regard to other situations and interests. Such decisions are effectuated and legitimated on the basis of ‘subjective reasons for agency’. On the one hand, these subjective reasons are grounded in the historically and biographically accessible social structures of meaning - or, the available alternatives for acting and thinking. On the other hand, they reflect a subject's own practical life interests (Holzkamp 1985: 342ff, 1991).

The category of ‘subjective reasons for agency’ is meant to indicate the dialectic connection between objective conditions of existence and individual agency motivations. On the one side, social structures of meaning represent social requirements of agency – all those activities, which must be undertaken in order to realise social production and reproduction processes on a given level of human development. On the other hand, social structures of meaning indicate the different possible meanings each individual can adhere to in a specific situation. The social context, in fact, exists independently from a single subject’s contribution to it. Consequently, social requirements of agency as such do not have a coercive character with regard to the individual. Inversely, subjective decisions about agency and meaning are not self-evident automatic outcomes of social structures of meaning either. Instead, in the face of alternative meaning constructions, requirements, and options of agency, subjects necessarily have to make choices, and thus, effect conscious reactions.

The crucial point for the connection between social structures and subjective agency lies precisely in the human capacity to develop a gnostic relation to the world and to themselves. That is, “the ability to consciously react to social meaning structures as these constitute personal agency options” (Holzkamp 1985: 243; translation K.C.). While this capacity appears here as a consequence of the social character of human life, historically, it represents a necessary precondition for human life to develop in such a social form in the first place. It is because of this ability that human thinking, feeling, and acting is not determined by the social context, and that human beings always have the possibility of using and developing action potential in a ‘restrictive’ or ‘enlarged’ way. That is, they can either, in a restrictive way, stick to coping practices, which allow for acting and interacting within the given social relations. Or, in an enlarged way, they can try to change these given relations and to enhance their own command over living conditions. The decision for or against an attempt to increase one’s own action potential is not given. Instead it relates to the specific features of every situation, which a subject faces: It has to and can be taken up anew in each situation.

The possibility for conscious conduct does not contradict the objective character of social structures and processes. Instead, such conscious conduct is always a subjective realisation of social structures of meaning and respective agency options.<sup>10</sup> With this backdrop, subjective reasons for agency can be considered as those social meaning structures that gain relevance for subjects’ coping practices. Both the freest and the most restricted decisions are socially

---

<sup>10</sup> In Holzkamp’s terms, a subject’s acting and thinking results from consciously seizing and comprehending social meanings by which present conditions of existence are conveyed. To assess their conditions of existence, as well as to express subjective meanings, subjects must refer to socially available and understandable forms of thinking and speaking, and that requires referring to some form of language as an interactive social product.

grounded in the conditions of existence faced by an individual. They both depend on the concrete historical formation of society in which they emerge, as well as on each individual's specific position within these social structures. At the same time, these social conditions of existence do not determine a subject's action potential. They only condition its 'phenomenological aspect' - that is, "the way in which subjects consider, experience and emotionally value these conditions as their own 'situation,' their personality traits and competences (...), and translate them into more or less self-motivated or forced forms of agency" (Holzkamp 1985: 353). Independently from this concrete 'phenomenological shape' of coping practices, the capacity to consciously increase one's own action potential always exists as a human characteristic and potential, though only as one possibility of agency among others.

The fact that subjective reasons for agency are socially grounded does not lead to any monolithic, homogeneous, and/or encompassing reflection of social meaning structures in a subject's common sense. First, on a social scale, common sense has many configurations following from an individual's specific and diverse social and biographical positionings. Variations can, thus, be attributed to categories of social differentiation such as race, class, and gender. Second, because of the need to make choices between various competing agency options, social structures of meaning are always only partly used and also partly rejected, transformed, and combined in diverse ways. As a consequence, each subject's common sense takes an itself a contradictory form. In Gramsci's terms, such "bizarre common sense" necessarily reflects the existing social contradictions (Gramsci 1994: 1376). Common sense is no "closed, self-contained, space," but of heterogeneous composition "open to both power influences and subjective appropriations" (Krauss 2004: 21f; translation K.C.).

In line with such dialectic thinking, the proposed differentiation between restrictive and enlarged action potential – as useful and necessary as it is for inquiring into possibilities of social change – should not be interpreted in a binary way. There is no dualism between restrictive and enlarged action potential, nor between submission and resistance. Instead, everyday coping practices necessarily always entail forms of adaptation and submission as well as appropriation and resistance. For, they constitute an active confrontation with social agency options and socially constructed meanings. As such, they produce and require a self-positioning within the social context – and, thus, an internalisation, as well as an appropriation, of these context conditions and their requirements for acting and thinking. In other words, no dualism exists either between structure and agency, or between domination

and subjectivity. Instead, a subject's agency always entails both production and reproduction of social relations and always has the potential capacity to produce social change.

Any change of or resistance to existing social structures becomes possible only through a specific, conscious self-positioning within a contradictory social context. As indicated by Gramsci's term 'bizarre common sense,' as long as subjects act within these contradictory conditions, their common sense and their consciousness cannot obtain any inner coherence. Instead, in order to gain some limited action potential, experienced contradictions are transferred and pushed away into the subconscious.<sup>11</sup> Yet, if a human being is seen here as a "product of his or her own practices" (Gramsci 1995:1348; translation K.C.), change also has to come about through each subject's own agency and its unique way of engaging with the world. With this perspective, changing the social world and changing oneself, as well as one's ways of acting and thinking about oneself and the world, appear as inseparably connected. First, to develop an enlarged, change producing action potential, it is crucial to make explicit within one's own common sense the experienced social contradictions, and one's own position within these, . The status of such contradictions has to be transformed from unconscious to conscious to make them accessible for change-inducing agency. Only on this basis can a subject engage in conscious efforts to increase coherence with his or her own common sense as a first necessary, though not sufficient, step towards change (Gramsci 1995: 1376). Second, as it happens within the social world, both of these aspects of social and individual change must be perceived as collective processes that presuppose interaction and participation in the collective, 'organic' production of society (Candeias 2004: 39ff; Krauss 1997).<sup>12</sup> In terms of developing an enlarged action potential, both the generalisability, as well as the socially differentiated distribution of conflict experiences and coping practices, gain special analytical and practical interest.

Yet, as everyday competence, analysing contradictions poses a challenge: It requires subjects to think contrary to their routines and previously held assumptions. Therefore, it will necessarily be conditioned by a risk evaluation that confronts the (uncertain) possibility of gaining new, increased action potentials with the threat of losing the previously acquired,

---

<sup>11</sup> A subject's subconscious also has a social character. Candeias emphasises this understanding as an important difference to the naturalising, ontological concepts of subconsciousness used by post-structuralist thinkers like Foucault or Butler (2004: 39f).

<sup>12</sup> "The individual does not relate to others through a sequence of connections, but in an organic way, by participating in organisations ranging from simple to very complex ones. (...) These relations are not mechanical. They are active and conscious, and hence they reflect the higher or lower comprehension which an individual possesses of these relations. Therefore, it can be said that everybody changes in the measure in which he/she changes the whole set of relations of which he/she constitutes the central focus. (...) If one's own individuality is constituted by the ensemble of these relations, to form a personality means becoming conscious of these relations. Changing one's personality means changing the ensemble of these relations" (Gramsci 1995: 1348; translation K.C.).



secure and approved, though limited ones (Holzkamp 1985: 373).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, analysing contradictions as possible agency options and effectively engaging with them presupposes opportunities for developing and practicing dialectic forms of thinking. In the empirical reality, however, such opportunities and respective spaces for learning are limited by cultural contexts fostering dualist and reductionist worldviews. Such limits are (re)produced by the subjects' lacking conscious appropriation of knowledge, which might be motivated again by some previously obtained restrictive action potential and its risky questioning.

Summing up this section's argument, coping practices and action potential are socially grounded and derived from the socially available agency requirements and options, as well as the distribution of material and cognitive resources. They must be analysed in the context of social power relations and with respect to a subject's social and biographical position within these. A subject's material and cognitive coping practices, their agency, and common sense are formed through their active confrontation with these conditions of existence and the inherent conflicts and contradictions contained therein. In these coping processes, subjects develop subjective reasons for agency, by which they attribute more or less importance to different social agency alternatives and position themselves within the social context. Humans are always able to consciously react to given social agency requirements and meanings and, thus, can (potentially) try to enhance their command over the conditions of their existence. Their self-positioning within society, as well as the common sense on which this is based, can be expected to be heterogeneous and contradictory – as it is necessarily based on social structures of meaning that reflect social conflicts.

The next section further examines the dialectics of agency and power. It addresses the role played by a subject's socio-structural and biographic positions as well as their practices of self-positioning within the social context. For this purpose, four different additional theoretical approaches focussing on subject practices and/or the formation of subjectivity are briefly introduced. The aim is clearly not to give an encompassing overview of these approaches, but to highlight some useful contributions and complements that they offer for the research questions and the contradiction-focussed research design presented in this study.

---

<sup>13</sup> The opposite is also possible, as a restrictive action potential can lose its functionality, get disqualified and denied, and then needs to be adapted to changing social context conditions.

### ***2.3 Second subject-theoretical background: Socio-structural, biographical, power-immanent and identity-related positionings***

The four theoretical approaches presented here are Bourdieu's theory of habitus, Schütz's idea of subjective relevance, Foucault's understanding of subject constitution, and Hall's concept of identity-positions. Bourdieu, Schütz, and Hall are of interest for the chosen research setting because they all put a subject's everyday practices of acting and thinking in the centre of their theoretical reasoning, while positioning these practices to different degrees within social power relations. Foucault is useful precisely for his analysis of power processes and how subjectivity is inscribed in these, although he does not address a subject's concrete everyday practices.

Bourdieu's theory of habitus aims at a 'realistic' reformulation of class theory (Krauss 2004: 11). It conceptualises the relationship between specific socio-structural living conditions and subjective forms of acting and thinking. In Bourdieu's understanding, social positions are incorporated by subjects in the form of routinised patterns of thinking, acting, and perceiving. The resulting 'habitus' generates class specific forms of everyday practices and lifestyles. In other words, the category of habitus serves to connect social structures with a subject's everyday practices.

Bourdieu's approach is relevant here in two aspects. First, his broad view of capital, which is not only linked to economic status, allows for a more comprehensive understanding of a subject's social conditions of existence (Bourdieu 1987a), as it comprises economic, social and cultural, or symbolic, forms of capital. Second, his conceptualisation of habitus as a 'practical sense' (Bourdieu 1987) comes close to the concept of coping practices, as it sees subjects' acting and thinking as resulting from their active confrontation with present living conditions and the distribution of available resources.

Yet, the focus on routinised aspects of everyday practices constitutes a limit of this habitus concept. It under evaluates coping with irregular situations like conflicts, crises and experiences of contradictions, and does not sufficiently consider resulting possibilities of appropriation, subversion, and deviation from habitual patterns. Instead, Bourdieu seems to conceptualise habitus as an unconscious effect of unintentional processes of socialisation touching largely upon passive bodies (Krauss 2004: 17ff). It appears as determined by social structures and as producing correspondence between objective class positions on the one hand, and homogeneous class-related subject practices and symbolical lifestyles on the other. In Bourdieu's words, habitus constitutes a "second nature, a transformation of society's

necessities into motorist schemes and physical automatisms” (Bourdieu 1987a: 739, translation K.C.). This constitutes a clear contrast to critical psychology’s insistence on a subject’s capacity of conscious, goal-oriented acting, and the (shared) attempt to develop a dialectic understanding of everyday practices and social reality.<sup>14</sup> In the perspective of critical psychology, habitus would never determine a subject’s agency, although it obviously reflects, transmits, and reproduces material and symbolical power relations (Candeias 2004: 34ff).

At the same time, the insistence on routines allows for a better understanding of why restrictive forms of coping can gain a high stability - though they do not resolve but only handle and transfer experienced contradictions, and only achieve limited forms of interest realisation and disposal over one’s own living conditions. Habitus stabilises a subject’s self-positioning within the social world. Thus, this category points to the difficult task of modifying once established coping practices, of running the risk of losing previously obtained action potential, and to reconsider and question at least part of one’s own habitus, self-concepts, and identity constructions. Moreover, Bourdieu’s insistence on the corporal form of habitus, in the literal meaning of ‘incorporation’ of social structures, goes beyond the cognitive and/or practice focused thinking of critical psychology, although the latter’s concept of practice entails a sensuous understanding of a subject’s interaction with and transformation of the (material) world.

Turning to Schütz’s concept of “subjective relevance structures”, the interesting aspect here is that he conceives the formation of subjective agency motivations as a continuous learning process (Schütz 1971: 152-170; translation K.C.). This opens up the perspective beyond routine actions, as it puts the possible re-elaboration and adaptation of meaning constructions within each concrete agency situation into the centre. Selecting between different available meanings in these everyday situations, according to Schütz, is a question of how much relevance these meanings gain for a subject’s agency. Subjects attribute relevance according to three different reasons: In a first instance, their motivations and interests appear as central, basic reasons for the choice of specific meanings and agency options. This is what Schütz calls “motivational relevance”. Second, interest realisation is no routinised, automatic or unproblematic process. Instead, each concrete situation might confront subjects with new

---

<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu explicitly aims at overcoming the dichotomy of subjectivism versus objectivism. Yet, as Krauss points out, not only the structure-dominated meaning of habitus, but also his binary distinction of everyday practices and scientific knowledge is problematic in this respect. It is crucial to stress the relative liberty of scientists’ work from everyday necessities of agency – and, thus, the possibility to take a relatively distanced position as an observer - as a precondition for scientific knowledge production. But, the strict differentiation between the two forms of everyday and scientific knowledge underestimates their actual mutual penetration and their positioning within a social context (Krauss 2004).

problems. It, thus, brings up explanatory limits of the previously acquired cognitive repertoire, which subjects rely on to face the encountered problem. In this situation, the experienced problem and the insufficient available meaning constructions themselves gain “thematic relevance” in the sense that they need to be reconsidered, rearranged, and/or supplemented by additional knowledge on the respective issue. The third form of subjective relevance, relates to the choice of meanings in order to cope with the encountered situations, problems, knowledge limits, and arising needs for additional interpretation: “Interpretational relevance” is given to those meanings which result as useful to make sense of daily requirements of acting and thinking (Schütz 1971: 160ff; translation K.C.).

Although, in Schütz terms, these different forms of relevance are constantly put on trial and re-elaborated within everyday agency, they form “subjective structures of relevance”. These depend on the “ontological conditions” or the “objective world” subjects live in. Most crucially, in confrontation with this world, structures of relevance are biographically formed. Throughout their biography, subjects accumulate a certain cognitive repertoire, a personal stock of experiences and knowledge gathered during the life course, throughout socialisation and previous decision processes. This repertoire is structured according to the different learned forms and degrees of relevance attributed to each of its elements. In every concrete situation, the selection of specific meanings as relevant, thus, depends on a subject’s history, his/her current biographical situation, as well as his/her future life plans. This selection happens on the basis of the previously available, practically acquired, and structured knowledge. For Schütz, the aim of any selection process is to transform encountered problems into unquestionable situations. That is, to turn them into a state without insecurities and need for further interpretation or questioning of so far practised agency orientations. An unquestioning acceptance of the given world is considered as a “natural attitude”.

A certain tension exists between these two levels of analysis, that of a constant learning process and a continuous development of a subject’s cognitive repertoire, and that of structures of relevance based on already existing knowledge and unquestioning acceptance of given living conditions. If subjects shape their agency according to a desire for unquestionable patterns of orientation, then this severely limits their possibilities to challenge once adopted meanings and to acquire new knowledge. It restricts possible learning processes as it only allows for forms of acting and thinking, which conform to the given world and its social relations. In other words, Schütz’ concept acknowledges only a restrictive action potential.

This tension might well reflect empirical reality, a subject's everyday experiences, and the inherent difficulties to develop enlarged action potential. In fact, this present study will clearly point to the strong abilities of adapting and resigning oneself to an unappealing situation, which retail employees develop with their coping practices in order to balance and contain experienced conflicts and contradictions. Yet, scientific research has the task of explicitly naming and critically investigating these tensions, agency limits, and contradictions. At least for the analysis of action potential, its blockages, as well as possible expansions, this would be a necessary precondition. Schütz, in contrast, limits himself to a typification of different socio-cultural structures of relevance and agency patterns. Though, the relevance of a subject's social positions for his/her meaning constructions is recognised in this, social power structures, their production processes, as well as their effects on the distribution of resources and the formation of subjectivity are still not addressed. Instead, the concept of subjective structures of relevance remains an ontological approach. It takes the given social relations, as well as encountered subjective meaning constructions, as unquestioned and natural facts, without considering the development of enlarged action potential, and thus, of social change, as possible relevant agency option.

Despite these important limits, Schütz's concept is a useful complement to the theoretical approach and research questions presented here. It enables a better understanding of inertia within a subject's restrictive coping practices (by focussing on routinised, persisting forms of acting and thinking) as a result of active, practical learning processes by which action potential is acquired within a given context (and not simply as reflections and incorporation of social structures as in Bourdieu's concept of habitus). Additionally, it offers a more precise view of the diverse stages in the subjective process by which meaning is constructed. Hence, the distinction of different forms of relevance will be used in the following to systematise employees' conflict experiences.

In contrast to Schütz, Foucault places social power processes and their linkages with subjectivity into the focus of his theoretical efforts. The production of meaning and knowledge is also considered as such a power process. Power is conceptualised as a discursive, decentralised process that passes through, and thus, involves each subject. The relation between power and subjectivity is an ambivalent, double one. On the one hand, the constitution of subjectivity proceeds through the internalisation of control (Foucault 1977). That is, control is not only achieved through external coercion, but also entails self-control. On the other hand, subject formation relies on a subject's active practices of regulating the

self, which in Foucault's words are called "technologies of the self" (Foucault 1989, 1989a). Such modulation of the self can not be reduced to practices of subjugation effected by a subject itself. Instead, it is motivated by a subject's own interests and decisions, though these decisions and interests stand in close relation with the present social forms of governmentality<sup>15</sup> with social discourses and (resulting) power structures. Subjectivity, therefore, is not the opposite of power, but it is always immanent to power; it is always constituted within power processes (Foucault 2006: 108f).<sup>16</sup>

This concept of power comes close to Gramsci's understanding of hegemony. Again, power is perceived as functioning through a mix of coercion and consent. Foucault's approach is valuable here as it stresses the double character of subjectification as a process functioning from two sides, from above (through the internalisation of control) and from below (through technologies of the self). It points to the fact that everyday practices of coping always have to do with the issue of self-constitution and active self-modulation, as part of a subject's interests and as a precondition for being able to position oneself and to act within society. Foucault's thinking contrasts with Bourdieu's concept of habitus - as the latter is equally conceived of as an outcome of processes of self-constitution, but at the same time as constituting subjects as 'passive bodies' enacting incorporated agency routines.

Foucault's insistence in the power-immanent character of subjectivity recalls the dialectic understanding of subjectivity aimed at here. At least potentially, this argument points beyond the dualist perception of (self-)control versus free subjectivity, autonomy, and resistance criticised above. Hence, it offers an important impulse against any dichotomist perception of restricted and enlarged action potential. Yet, as Reitz points out, in Foucault's own writings, this dialectic potential appears to be split between two different periods of production: In an earlier phase, he focuses on the disciplinary character of power processes and their internalisation by subjects. While the social context of power processes is central to this analysis, subjects still appear as only subordinated, although they might effectuate their subordination by themselves. The late Foucault, in turn, concentrates on an individual's own, self-motivated practices of constituting itself as an acting subject.<sup>17</sup> But now, he takes on a

---

<sup>15</sup> In Foucault's terms, 'governmentality' is meant as a category to connect social technologies of power and a subject's self-technologies. On the side of social power technologies, governmentality refers to forms of social regulation by which certain forms of subjectivity are sustained and produced, namely through discourses and knowledge production.

<sup>16</sup> As would have to be added and concretised in the words of Bourdieu, Schütz, and critical psychology, such subject constitution comprises agency routines, self-concepts and habitus, structures of relevance and meanings, subjective reasons for agency, and action potential.

<sup>17</sup> The concept of self-technologies is controversially discussed in response to Foucault's theories. By some it is understood (and criticised) as just another form of asserting a subject's self-submission, but others see in it a reintroduction of subjective margins of freedom, autonomy, and resistance.

rather ‘privatising perspective,’ insisting in personal moral orientations and particularistic agency perspectives, without any longer considering social relations as a whole. As pointed out by Menz, these later analyses of self-technologies display strong, striking similarities to the neoliberal call for a self-responsible, self-entrepreneurial, performative subject (Menz 2009: 113). The underlying problem in this is that power in all of Foucault’s thinking seems to become an autonomous category. This is because he does not name clear interests, agency motivations, actors, and their effective positioning within (material) social relations of power and production (Reitz 2003: 93ff; Menz 2009: 121).

This limit is closely related to Foucault’s own research perspective: “Foucault himself underlined that his analyses of ethical technologies of the self do not aim at a realistic history of the subject or of any form of subjectivity, but at a history of their ‘problematization’ without mixing up these subjects’ self-reflections with a ‘realistic’ concept of the subject” (Foucault 1989, quoted from Menz 2009: 113; translation K.C.). Due to this self-restriction to discourse analysis, Foucault’s categories are only of limited use for an investigation into subjects’ everyday coping practices and the development of their action potential. Foucault’s approach gets along without any material understanding of the subject and its concrete everyday practices (Menz 2009: 117). It misses comprehending how social discourses and their ideological calls are translated into actual, relevant agency orientations, as this happens only through subjects’ daily coping practices, their confrontation with their concrete conditions of existence, and the respective requirements of acting and thinking. Subjectivities, agency orientations, and self-perceptions do not exist before or without these everyday practices; they are not only produced on a discursive level, but require subjects’ active interaction with the social world. While Foucault’s work offers important insight into the shape of power processes, and argues forcefully against any form of economic structuralism, it does not have much to contribute to a better understanding of this connection between concrete everyday practices and social conditions of existence. Nor does it provide much inspiration in terms of increasing subjects’ action potential beyond these given social conditions.

The last concept to be broadly presented here is Hall’s notion of identity-positions. (Hall 1990: 222-237; Hall 1996: 627; Hall 1996a: 502; Hall 1997). With this term, also Hall attempts to conceptualise the process of the self-constitution of subjects. But, in contrast to Foucault, he explicitly locates such self-constitutions within the class relations of capitalist society and respective interest struggles. As an approach from cultural studies, the focal point

here is precisely the connection between social relations, cultural forms, and subject agency. Still, also Hall does not investigate concrete everyday practices in an encompassing way, but ‘only’ inquires into a subject’s everyday consciousness and its ideological forms. The development of these ideological forms of consciousness, however, is conceptualised and examined as a cultural practice and thus as an important part of everyday practices.

As for Foucault and Bourdieu, a subject’s acting and thinking is seen as intimately interwoven with their own person and their practices of self-constitution. Hall’s concepts are relevant to the contradiction-oriented theoretical frame used here due to the similar material, practice-related term of subjectivity, which they are based on. The constitution of subjectivity is considered as an outcome of a subject’s coping practices. Gaining action potential and interacting, in this perspective, requires positioning oneself as a self within the social world. That is, practices of subject constitution pass through an identitarian positioning. Such positioning is a necessary means of producing concrete action potentials – and not, as in Foucault’s thinking, an expression of a subject’s abstract inscription into power relations.

In Hall’s view, such subject positions always entail a means to express the existing social relations: “Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, (...) identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (Hall 1990: 225). They are, thus, related to a specific historical context and the respective socially available and subjectively relevant worldviews and cultural forms, including namely moral orientations and expectations of justice, as well as patterns of social recognition and legitimation. As products of a subject’s active coping practices, identitarian positioning represents a constant process. Identity-positions constitute temporary fixings, “instable points of identification or suture” (Hall 1990:226) between social conditions and discourses on the one hand, and the self on the other. Consequently, they are always fragmented and only occur in plural. In that, Hall’s concept closely relates to and helps to substantiate Gramsci’s understanding of the bizarre, contradictory character of common sense. The concept of multiple identity-positions allows for a dialectic understanding of subjectivity. Conceptualised as coping practices, identitarian positionings always comprise both forms of internalised coercion and appropriation. Through their practices of self-positioning, subjects do not only appropriate action potential, but they also dislocate and defer social meanings and agency requirements.<sup>18</sup> These meanings and requirements have to be translated and articulated by a subject’s own agency orientations in order to allow for any self-positioning and coping.

---

<sup>18</sup> Here, Hall refers to Derrida’s concept of ‘différance’ in order to stress the connection between difference and unity – or, the both productive and reproductive way in which subjects appropriate meaning and produce their identity. Différance in French, in fact, has both these meanings of difference and deferment (Hall 1994: 33).



In this, self-positioning always means dealing with external, social identity politics, but also enacting one's own politics. It constitutes a conflictive, contingent, and open process, which "comprises a series of phenomena ranging from mimesis, mimicry, and habitualised reproduction to creative, self-reflexive, or even subversive forms of positionings" (Thies/Kaltmeier 2008:15). Contributing to this mix are also subversive practices that are to be understood as situated within a given social context and as producing self-positionings (and thus always also integration) within this context. But, due to its conflictive and contingent character, this process also always entails a potential for producing enlarged, social change inducing action potential.

In sum, whereas Bourdieu and Schütz point to the relevance of routine agency, and thus, the difficulties of changing and expanding previously established coping practices, Foucault and Hall are useful here for insisting on both the productive and reproductive aspects of a subject's constitution. Yet, only Hall effectively conceptualises a subject's everyday practices and their positioning within society as a contradictory, conflictive, and contingent process of coping.

## *2.4 Labour process theory and a practice-oriented understanding of labour*

The following section translates the subject-theoretical reflections presented so far into the empirical field that is at stake in this research. It aims to develop an adequate theoretical understanding of the labour process and, more precisely, of employees' everyday practices in the face of ongoing flexibilisation and subjectification of work and employment. For this purpose, reference is made to labour process theory. This research strand analyses the functioning of labour control, as a management tool to achieve workforce alignment and workplace consent, as well as employees' reactions to such control, their practices of submission and resistance, and the resulting conflicts on the shop floor.

In line with the above arguments, the starting point for empirical investigation is employees' experiences of everyday conflicts. On the theoretical level, such a focus on conflict experiences within the labour process points to the transformation problem (as it is conceptualised in labour process theory). This relates to the fact that although employers may buy the right to use an employee's work capacity for a certain amount of time, the transformation of this (potential) capacity into the expected actual work performance still

depends on the will and behaviour of the latter. As a consequence, the need for labour control arises (Braverman 1977: 45ff; Edwards 1981).<sup>19</sup>

Such labour control always appears as open to conflict (O'Doherty/Willmott 2001). With their subjectivity, employees can be expected to carry into the work process a whole range of interests, attitudes, and behaviours, which do not suffice and/or even contradict the goal of capital accumulation and are supposed to be eliminated by means of labour control. However, such control, as any form of power, can not be established by simple coercion. It requires the consent of the controlled.

Therefore, labour control has to be understood as an outcome of continuous struggles between different competing interests among all of those involved, and not as anything static or homogeneous. It necessarily has to involve employees' subjectivities. As Menz puts it, labour control "must be grounded in self-regulation, (including) subjects' own aspirations for themselves as well as their own particular conception of 'good' work performances" (Menz 2009: 120; translation K.C.). Taking into account such a self-regulated, active contribution of employees to the realisation of labour control and the production of workplace consent, power processes can be detected even in the absence of open conflicts: Power and workforce alignment are achieved not only where they have to be forced against a subject's will, but also through incorporation by the subjects themselves.

While labour process theory represents an adequate approach to conceptualise the labour process as a conflictive situation, the concept of subjectivity used within this school lacks complexity. Especially problematic is the tendency to perceive a dualist opposition of control versus resistance. Within the traditional labour process debate, that is in the works of Braverman and Burawoy,<sup>20</sup> subjects' practices of "appropriation, transformation and subversion" remain undervalued (Menz 2009: 78ff). Consequently, a subject's agency appears as largely confined to submission under labour control. In Braverman's thinking, this is thought of as submission under an external force – the control imperative and coercion exercised by management (Bravermann 1974). For Burawoy, in contrast, production of consent through cultural patterns is central for assuring employees' effective self-control. While the latter tries to overcome the imperative of control by investigating how consent is

---

<sup>19</sup> For a definition of the transformation problem see also Deutschmann 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Both, Braverman and Burawoy studied industrial labour in U.S. corporations. In *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Braverman refers to a wide range of different jobs: apprentice coppersmith, steel-fabricating layout man, pipe fitter, sheet metal worker, freight car repairman, and structural steel fitter (Braverman 1974). For *Manufacturing Consent*, Burawoy conducted an ethnographical study as a machine operator in the engine division of Allied Corporation (Burawoy 1979).

produced through employees' self-enacting, self-willed agency, the focus remains on effective, functioning (self-)control. 'Games' are analysed as important tools and space for compensating and realising requirements of self-control, particularly within a work context that offers only limited opportunities of actual self-development (Burawoy 1979).

However, the current labour process debate has witnessed considerable evolutions in terms of concepts of subjectivity, particularly by including Foucauldian concepts (such as the productive character of power) into the theoretical frame. Collinson formulates this dialectic understanding as follows: "Resistance and consent are rarely polarized extremes on a continuum of possible worker discursive practices. Rather they are usually inextricably and simultaneously linked, often in contradictory ways within particular organizational cultures, discourses and practices. Resistance frequently contains elements of consent and consent often incorporates aspects of resistance" (Collinson 1994: 29). Similarly, du Gay, quoting de Certeau, points to the linkages between practices of assimilation and appropriation, and the always also appropriative character of assimilation processes: "'Assimilation' doesn't necessarily mean becoming similar to what one absorbs, but rather suggests a situation in which one makes something similar to what one is, establishing it as one's own through appropriating or reappropriating it" (du Gay 1996: 89). Knights and Willmott try to overcome dualist thinking by adding the dimension of identity construction to their analytical frame (Knights/Willmott 1989, 1990; Menz 2009: 101ff). Burawoy's 'games' are reinterpreted not simply as forms of self-control, but as strategies of identity production (of white male workers). Finally, post-structuralist approaches in labour process theory have forcefully insisted on the fact that no such thing as 'pure' resistance, no outside, and no subject position from which one acquires a 'God's eyes view' exists. That is to say that also every enlarged action potential, every form of resistance and appropriation, passes through the confrontation with the social context and refers to socially constructed meanings.

Yet, all in all, most of these recent evolving theoretical approaches, still maintain some more or less explicit dualist argumentation. Du Gay, from his insight on the interrelated character of appropriation and assimilation, draws the conclusion that all employees' practices are to be conceived of as subordinate tactics. He gives up a really dialectic understanding the way it is aimed at and proposed here. Also following Knight's and Willmott's concept of identity construction, subjects in the end are still subordinate, although now the subordination appears as motivated by their own interests. Similarly, also current empirical labour process

studies most often still strictly separate control and resistance: Generally, their focus is either on the self-submissive or the autonomous, liberating aspects of a subject's practices.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast, from a dialectic understanding of subjectivity, it would be necessary to more explicitly take into account the self-actualising practices, and the own rationalities and processes of appropriation included in a subject's coping strategies. Moreover, it would be useful to consider a subject's whole life practices – and not only the strictly work-related ones – in order to get a full grasp of daily conflict experiences, to better understand the motivations and articulations of different coping practices, and to understand the linkages between control and resistance. This could be obtained with a more strictly practice-related understanding of labour as has been proposed by Marx (Pfeiffer 2003, 2004; Marx/Engels 1975, MECW 5: 41ff; Marx 1996, MECW 35: 51ff, 187ff). In this perspective, human labour is considered as appropriation of the world. In this process of appropriation, confrontation and interaction with the world, labour capacity is necessarily and simultaneously produced and expended - as if in “perpetual motion” (Pfeiffer 2003: 197; translation K.C.). The latter, the expenditure, occurs through the transformation of labour capacity into concrete labour power. In Marx's terms, human labour always has a double, dialectic character: Labour capacities and labour power are closely interrelated, practice-related aspects of subjectivity. Labour capacities are the results of a practical appropriation, which take form and substance within the subject. They refer to living labour and related living knowledge. As such, they always comprise non-objectified elements – they are not depersonalised, externalised and turned into an object, but are necessarily personal, internal, and bound to the subject, which appropriates and develops them through its practices. Labour power, in turn, only relates to such elements of labour capacity that can be objectified. It is produced by human's living labour capacity, but it always already represents an abstraction from these living forces. Labour capacity, in contrast, always partly eludes such abstraction due to its subject-bound character.

These evasive, non-objectified characteristics give a subject's practices a self-willed form, which has two basic reasons. First, it is bound to the sensuousness of human labour. In Marxist theory, such sensuousness is a central phenomenological level of labour practices. It is understood in a concrete, practical, and practice-related way, as the use and application of one's senses in the appropriation of the world. It is this sensuousness, which allows for the self-will in a subject's (labour) practices, or for their subjectivity (with respect to the influencing power of the given conditions and requirements of acting and thinking). Sensuous

---

<sup>21</sup> Examples for current empirical labour process research are given in the following chapter when the state of art in labour sociology is presented.

practices can never be completely objectified or controlled, because they involve the subject as a whole, with all its experiences, perceptions and feelings, needs and interests.

This holistic character is the second self-will inducing aspect of human labour. Subjects appropriate and confront the world throughout their whole life practices, through all practices that relate to and reproduce their life. And through all these life practices labour capacity is produced within the wage labour relation, but also in other realms as well. In other words, a holistic understanding of subject practices is used here to overcome and replace the dualism between the subject as a living, autonomous, self-actuating person and the exploitation of the subject's labour power within the capitalist production process, which is still typical in labour studies and the sociology of work. Similarly, such reasoning results in a specification of the transformation problem: Subjectivity is nothing external to the labour process, but is also produced within it (Pfeiffer 2003: 195). The other way around, work attitudes and labour practices are also always influenced by 'externally' produced and acquired subject orientations and positionings. They do not result from the labour process and its characteristics and requirements alone (Menz 2009: 85f). Thus, conflicts resulting from the transformation problem occur not between subject-related interests and labour requirements – between employees' supposedly opposed expressive and instrumental interests or between employees' subjectivity and labour control – but always due to the integration of some and the exclusion of other aspects of subjects' subjective labour capacity.

Moreover, labour capacities are to be considered in an encompassing way also in the sense that they have a social character: They pertain to the appropriation of and consequently reflect society and social relations as a whole. Yet, if this is the case, if labour capacities are produced within the encompassing life practices of subjects, if they relate to the appropriation of social relations as a whole, and if only part of these capacities are always integrated, used and enacted within the labour process, that is to say that they always exceed what is objectified and exploited as labour power. Subjects are always able to do more than what is required within the labour process; not least because they have to develop additional capacities to effectuate the self-regulation and dressing that is necessary to limit themselves to the enactment of only those capacities (and interests) fitting the labour process. Hence, a self-willed and (possibly) utopian potential also comes into view from this holistic understanding of labour practices. The labour capacities of subjects are "a living reminder of the historical potential of the entire social workforce" (Pfeiffer 2003: 197). And this potential comprises all those capacities, which are not realised and excluded from the hegemonic regime of production and reproduction of social life.

In order to grasp and uncover this utopian potential or, in other words, the historically available possibilities of agency and development, inquiring into a subject's experiences of contradictions is crucial. As the inclusion and exclusion of encompassing subject capacities in and from the labour process is always only partial, it can be expected to generate conflict experiences, which have to be dealt with by a subject's everyday practices. These conflict experiences might be confronted and addressed, or pushed aside, rendered invisible, and be balanced in various forms within employees' daily ways of acting and thinking. However, these utopian potentials still represent only possibilities, as a subject's practices and labour capacity (as resulting from a sensuous confrontation with the world) still remain involved in the existing social relations.

In conclusion, a practice-oriented concept of labour appears appropriate for the dialectic understanding of agency and structure, subjectivity, and labour power. It points to each subject's concrete confrontation with the social world, to the practical requirements of acting and thinking subjects have to face, as well as to their coping practices and struggles for acquiring action potential. In considering these practices in their complexity, their connection with the social world, and their practice-related reasons, this concept helps overcoming any dualist thinking with regards to structure and agency, or control and resistance.

## ***2.5 Conclusion: management strategies, conflict experiences and coping practices as levels of empirical analysis***

This section translates the theoretical perspective developed so far in terms of an empirical research strategy. For this purpose, it insists in the central analytical steps, topics, and categories of analysis that derive from this theoretical setting. These central issues are the necessary, interconnected four analytical levels of labour control, everyday conflict experiences, individual and collective coping practices; the articulation between subject practices, meaning constructions and social requirements; the distinction between different forms of coping, instead of different employee types; and, finally, the relevance of a collective level of analysis.

As presented in the introduction, the central research question of this study concerns employees' everyday experiences of precarisation and subjectification. The aim is to sketch out a map of current processes of precarisation and subjectification as they are seen from employees' eyes. This is considered as a basis for inquiring into both the functioning of Post-

Fordist labour control, and the prospects of enhancing employees' action potential and their disposal over work conditions. With regard to these research questions, the mixed background of labour process theory and Gramsci-oriented critical psychology implies structuring empirical analysis in four distinct, though interrelated parts. In other words, on the backdrop of the presented theoretical argumentation, it is now possible to further motivate the outline of this study, which has been roughly presented already in the introduction. As indicated above, starting from a structural analysis of management strategies of labour control and work organisation, investigation proceeds to employees' everyday work experiences. In a further step, these everyday experiences are critically analysed as socially grounded, subjectively reasonable coping practices. This is done on the two levels of individual and collective coping practices.

*Table 1: Levels of analysis*

<b>Level of analysis</b>	<b>Analytical focus</b>
Management strategies of labour control	➤ Requirements for acting and thinking
Employees' everyday work experiences	➤ Fields of conflict
Individual coping practices	➤ Forms of coping ➤ Articulation of social requirements, common sense and subject practices
Collective coping practices	➤ Social relations at the workplace ➤ Attitudes towards shopfloor solidarity and institutional interest representation

In terms of labour process theory, asking for employees' experiences and practices in front of current labour change, and especially current processes of precarisation and subjectification, as a precondition requires analysing the configuration of labour control, the work organisation and its power relations in which such employee practices take place. This is done in chapter six, by addressing the current processes of flexibilisation in large scale retailing, as well as their regulation through labour control and collective labour relations. In other words, this structural level of analysis serves to assess the context conditions which employees have to cope with in their daily labour practices.

Next, labour process theory points to the always already conflictive character of labour control, as well as its necessarily subjective, consent-requiring realisation. Hence, there is a need to investigate employees' experiences of such labour control in order to understand its

functioning. And, this investigation needs to be particularly focussed on the different (explicit and implicit) fields of conflict that emerge from employees' narrations. This first subject-oriented level of analysis is undertaken in chapter seven. Of particular interest here are conflicts between different interests in flexibility and self-regulation as they may exist between employees and management, between different groups of employees, or among various interests of single employees themselves. If such conflicts are generated from misrecognitions and exclusions of parts of an employee's identities and interests from the production process, moments of change in management strategies might be expected to be especially conflicting as they put existing consent and identities into question. That is, in asking for employees' work experiences in the context of current flexibilisation, precarisation and subjectification, chapter seven insists in the potentially disruptive aspects of labour processes and respective control regimes, as well as their problematic effects in terms of work conditions. In addition, it asks for the interrelations and joint functioning of these processes of flexibilisation, precarisation and subjectification as means of labour control.

Having individuated the central fields of conflicts in employees' work experiences, in an additional step, their reactions to these control regimes, labour requirements and conflict experiences can be analysed in more detail (chapter eight and nine). As indicated by the argumentation of critical psychology, employees' everyday practices and their respective narrations and meaning constructions have to be analysed in an ideologically critical way as reactions to (competing, potentially incompatible) social demands of acting and thinking which have to be translated by the subjects into subjective reasons for agency. Such an ideologically critical, socially grounded, practice- and subject-oriented analysis is undertaken in chapter eight and nine. For this purpose, the categories of coping practices, common sense and action potential are used. Given the social character of a subject's (reasons for) agency, as well as the research interest in enlarged action potential, what is of interest in this analysis of coping practices is not the single, isolated individual and its particular orientations, but rather the collective relevance of experiences and meaning constructions - or the relation between subjective reasons for agency and social requirements of acting and thinking. Thus, the focus is on how the consciousness of social structures is articulated and transmitted through the common sense of subjects.

With concrete reference to the labour process, the question at stake at this level of analysis is how employees become capable of acting in face of the given labour requirements, how workplace consent is produced, and how conflicts are enacted (confronted or balanced) through



their own coping practices. With regard to the empirical setting of this research, three aspects of this articulation between subject agency and social requirements are particularly relevant: (a) the alternatives and restraints for action set by the work requirements employees are expected to meet in their concrete work context, as well as the risks and opportunities for interest realisation each alternative entails, (b) the resources at their disposal to address their expected requirements, and (c) an employee's own motivations and constructions of meaning as they are expressed and reflected in his/her common sense, which guides agency.

The requirements of acting and thinking employees have to face concern the concrete work tasks and performance requirements, the (individual, collective, and/or political) regulation of employment relations and working conditions, the power relations and bargaining positions (of individual and collective actors both within the labour process and the political sphere), as well as the available patterns of legitimation (and delegitimation) of these performance requirements, regulations and power relations.

Resources are understood here in a wide sense, referring to Bourdieu's terms of economic, social, and cultural capital. In the empirical analysis, special emphasis is placed on: (a) an employee's employment position and history, especially with regard to the degree and trajectories of precarisation and professional growth opportunities; (b) the resources employees gain from their work (in terms of subsistence, labour rights, competencies of self-regulation, identity, and recognition), which are not least dependent on their current employment contract and on their position in the work place hierarchy (including relations with superiors and colleagues, as well as possible veto points against contested work-conditions); (c) their private life situation, as further influencing access to resources, as well as reproductive duties, responsibilities, and needs; and (d) access to organisational, material and cognitive collective resources and spaces, and thus to possibilities of collective interest articulation, be it directly through work place related or other political collectives.

All of these requirements and resources together produce the agency conditions an employee has to face in a given everyday work situation. On the empirical ground, there is no clear separation between the levels of requirements and resources, on the one hand, and employees' common sense and coping practices, on the other. Therefore, the analysis must aim at a cohesive investigation of subjects' practices. In this analysis, the distinction of different levels of requirements and resources just presented serves as analytical background grid, especially for assessing differences between employees. But, the actual presentation of coping practices is structured along different lines, revolving around the assessment, distinction and combination of different forms of coping; and that is around the shape and articulation of

different, concrete subject practices rather than general, fixed causal relations between specific requirements, individual resource disposal and resulting agency.

Such a focus on different forms of coping is also understood as an opposition to any ideal type construction concerning distinct groups of employees with specific coping attitudes and common sense configurations. In fact, dialectic thinking as a research requirement demands keeping a critical stance towards any typifications of subject practices. In their function of condensing and structuring empirical variations and complexity into typical, coherent sets of practices and attributes, stereotypes necessarily tend to eradicate contradictions from a subject's agency. In contrast, classifications of subject practices derived from this research are conceived of in a way that allows for multiple, fragmented, and contradictory subject positionings. As such, they refer to different, in themselves ambiguous, variably combinable and articulated forms of coping, but do not represent distinct subject types.

Still regarding the aimed cohesive examination of coping practices, three further aspects have to be addressed: the interrelated, mutually conditioning character of practical agency and common sense, the holistic shape of subject practices cross-cutting the spheres of work and life, and the relevance of a collective level of analysis. With regard to the further two issues, restrictions have to be made concerning the possible actual scope of this study.

As argued previously, the meaning constructions of employees play a twofold role as both the input and output of coping processes. In order to critically interpret, evaluate, and locate the empirically determined coping practices within their social and historical context, it is important to take into account both of these sides. One must conceptualise the generation of common sense as a continuous process of a subject's practical confrontation with and self-positioning in the social world. Yet, what is analysed within this temporary limited research project, obviously cannot be the way employees' meaning constructions are formed and re-elaborated throughout their life course. Empirical analysis here considers only the way employees make sense of their current working conditions: what kind of work attitudes they hold; which role these play for their coping practices, as well as for the realisation, maintenance, or challenging of labour control and workplace consent; and, crucially, which more or less conflictive and/or adaptive agency options and which restrictive or enlarged action potential this meaning constructions entail.<sup>22</sup>

As indicated above, a subject's work-related experiences and coping practices are impacted by interests and meaning constructions from spheres of life other than wage work. That is,

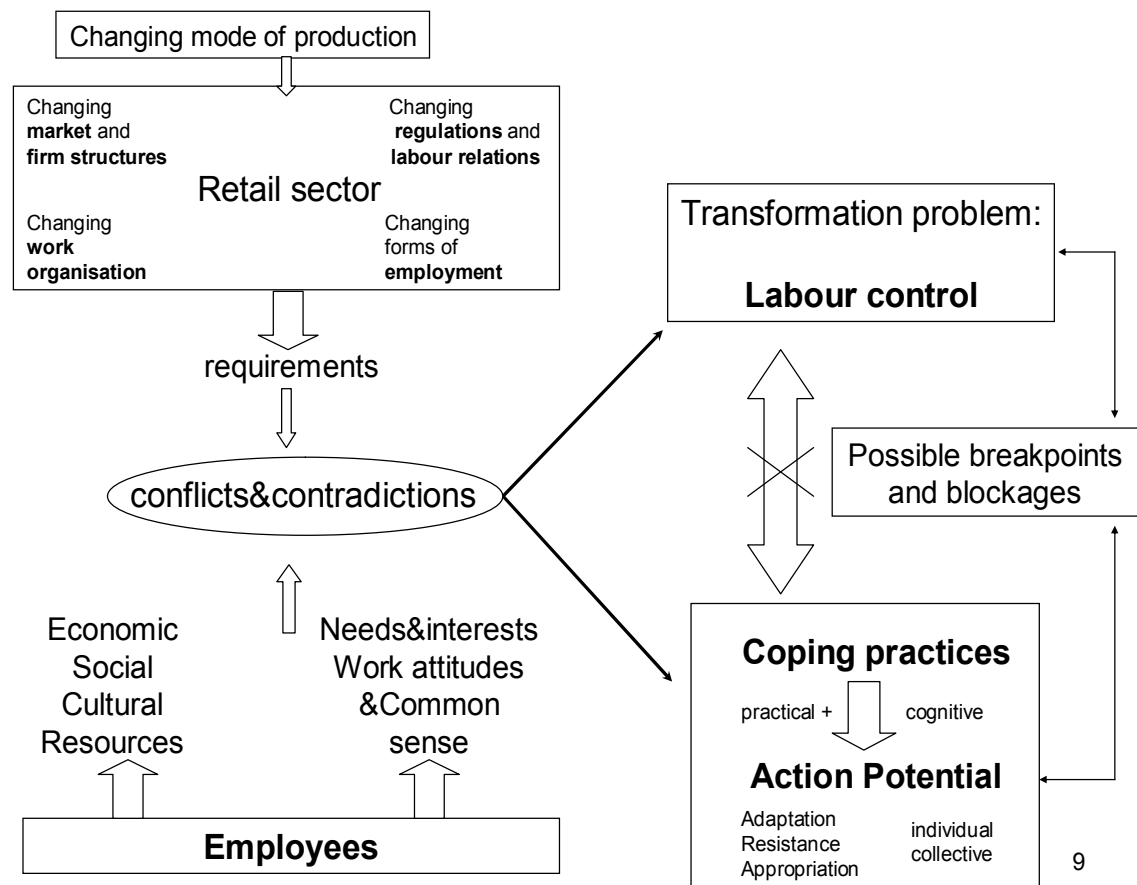
---

<sup>22</sup> Moreover, as is specified in chapter five, the empirical investigation is based only on interviews and does not entail participant observation. Therefore, practical agency is assessed only through employees' own stories.

work-related coping practices and common sense are to be considered as only one aspect of, while still closely interrelated with and conditioned by, a subject's encompassing, multiple, and fragmented self-positionings within society throughout all of his or her life activities. While such linkages are attentively taken into consideration where they emerge from employees' work-related stories and meaning constructions, the extent to which the entire life activities can be taken into consideration in the empirical investigation is necessarily limited, as interview time restricted. The focus, therefore, is clearly placed on work-related experiences.

These work-related coping practices are considered here both in their individual and collective form. Also on this level, the relationship between different (here: individual and collective) forms of coping is a crucial aspect of analysis. Besides for the above indicated necessary collective character of acquiring enlarged capacities of acting, the relevance of such a collective level of analysis results from the understanding of work as a field of social interaction structured by power relations: When employees act and construct meaning within their work contexts, they do not do so merely as individuals, but within social structures and in relation to others. The location within social relations can be expected to form part of a subject's understandings about work: The way they understand these social relations and their own position within them will influence their agency. Hence, individual coping practices have to be analysed with regard to the social positionings they entail and the social interactions they emerge from - be they between colleagues, with customers, or superiors. Consequently, in terms of collective coping, employees' attitudes towards both daily shop floor solidarity and institutionalised forms of collective interest representation are investigated.

Table 2: A subject-oriented approach to Labour process Theory



*Table 3: Theoretical frame - key insights for approaching a subject's (labour) practices*

<b>Critical Psychology</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Subject practices as coping with contradictory social requirements of acting and thinking</li> <li>➤ Coping practices as based on socially grounded subjective reasons for agency</li> <li>➤ Incoherent character of common sense as reflecting social contradictions</li> <li>➤ Coping as active, interest-driven, goal-oriented practice and as conscious reaction to social meaning structures</li> <li>➤ Human capacity to develop restricted and enlarged action potential</li> </ul>
<b>Bourdieu</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Habitus as a practical sense</li> <li>➤ Habitus as reflecting routine forms of acting and thinking</li> <li>➤ Habitus as based on economic, social and cultural capital</li> </ul>
<b>Schütz</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Meaning construction based on subjective relevance structures</li> <li>➤ Meaning construction as a continuous, biographic learning process</li> <li>➤ Meaning construction as selection process to transform encountered problems into unquestionable situations</li> </ul>
<b>Foucault</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Subject constitution through internalisation, self-control and self-regulation (technologies of the self)</li> <li>➤ Power-immanent character of subjectivity</li> </ul>
<b>Hall</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Subject constitution through fragmented, multiple, temporary identity-positions</li> <li>➤ Interrelated practices of internalisation and appropriation: dislocation of social meanings</li> </ul>
<b>Labour Process Theory</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Transformation problem as issue of labour control</li> <li>➤ Labour control as a mix of consent and coercion</li> <li>➤ Labour control as a conflictive process</li> </ul>
<b>Marxist sensuous and practice-oriented concept of labour</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Double, dialectic character of human labour</li> <li>➤ Linkages between control and resistance</li> <li>➤ Subjectivity as internal to the labour process</li> <li>➤ Social character and utopian potential of labour capacities</li> </ul>

## PART TWO: CONTEXT

### 3. Flexibilisation and subjectification of labour: The state of art in labour sociology

This chapter addresses the state of art within the core field of this research: labour sociology. Of interest here is how flexibilisation and subjectification of labour are analysed on the structural level regarding employment relations (3.2), work organisation, and labour control (3.3), as well as how they are discussed on the subjective level with their effects on subjectivities, work experiences, coping practices, and common sense (3.4).

The existing debate about these transformations is split between the analysis of flexibilised employment relations and labour markets, on the one hand, and subjectified labour processes, work organisation, and control, on the other. While there is significant conceptual and theoretical debate on changing subjectivities, concrete empirical inquiries into subjects' experiences and coping practices are still rare.

The following presentation primarily focusses on both the German and Italian research strands, as these represent the academic and (for Italy) the empirical contexts of this research. In addition, reference is made to the English speaking labour process debate since this addresses the issues of control and subjectivity, which are at the centre of the research questions raised here. Further material is included more specifically about retail labour and retail employees' work experiences and attitudes.<sup>23</sup> The attention lies on a qualitative and conceptual level of analysis, both with regard to subjectification, labour processes, control, and subjects' experiences, and concerning flexibilisation of employment and labour markets. The quantitative development of flexible employment relations is not in the focus here. This aspect is briefly addressed later in regards to the Milanese retail sector.

Before entering into this literature review of labour sociology, transformations in the social mode of production from Fordism to Post-Fordism are addressed on a more general scale (3.1). This introduction serves to illuminate the social, economic and political context in which current labour change takes place, and in which also employees' coping practices and any discussion about their action potential have to be located.

---

<sup>23</sup> There is no claim being made here for completeness. Instead, the literature review necessarily remains to some extent fragmented. It reflects the state of the field, as no unified strand of subject-oriented labour studies exists. The researchers highlighted here are the most relevant either in the field or to the research question pursued here.

### *3.1 Social transformations from Fordism to Post-Fordism*

Since the 1970s, with the crisis of Fordism, two major developments can be observed in the world of work. First, there has been a flexibilisation of work and employment, which goes hand in hand with processes of precarisation. Second, there has been an increased use of indirect forms of labour control, of participatory management strategies and decentralised labour processes – linked with a simultaneous trend of re-standardisation, recentralisation, and reorganisation of direct forms of control and supervision. This chapter aims to locate these multiple transformations of labour within their greater socio-historical context. That is, to describe the shift in the social mode of production from Fordism to Post-Fordism, as it occurs under neoliberal hegemony.<sup>24</sup> This is done in three steps: by addressing transformations at the level of the production process, the social mode of regulation, and the social relations of hegemony. On all these three fields, attention is focussed on those changes that effect labour processes, regulations and relations.

This macro level of analysis is considered relevant as contextualisation for approaching employees' everyday experiences, coping practices and action potential, because it defines the context conditions and power relations in which these subject practices emerge and which they have to confront. Relying on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, a specific mode of production (and, as part of it, also the new forms of (retail) labour under study here) is understood as coming into being not on its own but only by social struggles. These struggles for hegemony are based on coercive powers, but, above all, hegemonic positions have to achieve social consent. They are fought about within the places of production, as well as within the state, that is by means of state institutions and powers, as well as within civil society. Crucially, they involve the everyday life of subjects and the cultural and ideological patterns subjects' refer to in their everyday practices and common sense.

In order to argue about this shift from Fordism to Post-Fordism, it is useful to give a brief description of the former era of Fordism in order to take account of the historical character of the new social formation, evolving both from breaks and continuities with the former

---

<sup>24</sup> The term mode of production is closely related to a materialist understanding of society. It insists in the conditions of production as being central for the development and form of social structures (Haug 2003). In line with the theoretical reflections above on subject agency, this should not be understood in the sense of any economic determinism, but as indicating one important, power structured context condition that subjects have to face with their everyday practices of producing and reproducing social life. The mode of production comprises the relations of production, as well as the productive forces. Productive forces are all cognitive and material tools that are used in labour processes. Relations of production are constituted by the social relations, which regulate the access to natural resources and means of production, the division of labour and the distribution of labour products, and hence, the economic organisation of society.

constellation.<sup>25</sup> The Fordist mode of production was first of all characterised by a Taylorist organisation of production processes, based on a 'scientific' segmentation, standardisation, and measurement of work tasks and times. It was combined with a system of mass production of consumer goods, growing wages (for the industrial core workforce), the collective regulation of standardised forms of employment (full-time, life long employment with regular working times, covered by social security schemes), and the development and extension of the welfare state, thus, achieving a historical class compromise. Regulation of this class compromise was based on mass-integrative, reformist catch-all parties, big corporatist labour relations actors, and a labour relations system orientated towards social partnership and integration (Lipietz 1992; Krauss 1996: 17f; Deppe 1997: 45ff; Gruppe Demontage 1998: 24f; Bischoff 2001: 46; Bischoff/Detje 2001).

This Fordist mode of production developed slowly since the 1920s and had its 'golden age' from the 1950s to the 1970s. Since the late 1970s, it has entered into a period of crisis. With growing overcapacities, the system of mass production has come to its limit. Simultaneously, Taylorist work organisation and labour control were met with workers' growing passive and active resistance.<sup>26</sup> In reaction to these limits, new strategies of production and value realisation, as well as new forms of social and labour control, were developed. Regarding the production process, a central change came through a transnational network-shaped reorganisation of firm structures (Castells 1998; Laroche 1998; Haug 200; Jessop 2002). It is closely linked with processes of globalisation (Bonefeld 1996; Hirsch 1996, 2001; Jessop 2001; Sassen 2001), the development of information and communication technologies (Candeias 2000: 708-714; Castells 1998), as well as the flexible and subjectifying reorganisation of labour processes. Simultaneously, the striving for new forms of value realisation leads to the growth of both a service (Drucker 1969; Bell 1973; Coyle 1997; critical: Huws 2000) and a financial economy (Burchardt 1996; Haug 2000; Bischoff 2001).

---

<sup>25</sup> There was a lively debate about whether the transformations described can be considered as giving rise to a new social formation, or only to a rearticulating of individual aspects that would still be anchored in the old model or remain inconsistent without forming a new coherent and stable system (see for example Haug 2000, 2001 for the first standpoint, and Bischoff 2001, Bischoff/Detje 2001 for the second). The opinion advanced here is that there is always a need to take account of both breaks and continuities. If changes in the social formation are understood as being produced by social struggles then stability can always only be a temporary condition. In this respect, it should be taken into consideration that analyses of Fordism often overestimate the aspect of stability, while simultaneously under-evaluating the historically relatively short existence of a stable formation, as well as continuously ongoing social conflicts also existing within that period. The question is therefore not so much that of stability, but of trends and changes which gain or struggle for social hegemony and give (or intend to give) the social formation a new direction.

<sup>26</sup> Regulation theory often insists in decreasing productivity as a reason for the crisis. Such a decrease would be due to (a) workers' resistance, (b) an increase in unproductive regulatory tasks within management and administration, and (c) the inflexibility of the Fordist mass production system, which is hard to adjust to changes in customer demand and the development of more specialised small scale markets (Häusler/Hirsch 1987; Gruppe Demontage 1998; Brenner/Glick 1999).



Concerning more precisely the reorganisation of labour processes and employment, a central trend is the flexibilisation of labour. This flexibilisation regards all the different levels of employment contracts, work times and tasks. Consequently, there is a rise in temporary contracts and interim labour, (semi-)self-employment and project work, working outside the firm, at home or 'on the way,' with variable and irregular work times, as well as spatial and temporal mobility. Moreover, indirect forms of labour control are established. These rely on decentralised labour processes, as well as on participatory and normative mechanisms or discourses, which aim at increasing employees' self-control. Simultaneously, however, direct supervision and hierarchical power are also reinforced, and parts of labour processes and tasks are re-standardised - not least based on the new computerised technologies.<sup>27</sup>

In response to the crisis of Fordism, this reorganisation of labour can be considered a double attempt to regain control and to achieve a more effective integration of workers, and to realise rationalisation and cost reduction. In addition, it aims at gaining access to and more effectively exploiting specific aspects of employees' labour capacities, which are required within the new company structures, and/or in the face of the new technologies. This regards a subject's capacities for self-regulation and self-responsibility, of flexible, creative problem solving, and adaptability of social interaction and relational labour. Increasing relevance of such capacities is linked, moreover, to the growing of service activities as a further development trend within the current mode of production.

Beyond the level the production process, these changes in the world of work, as well as the overall transformations in the Post-Fordist regime of accumulation, are accompanied by the introduction of a new neoliberal mode of regulation that replaces or reorganises the old Fordist welfare state.<sup>28</sup> Transformations on both levels (of accumulation regime and mode of regulation) reflect, are produced by and produce themselves shifts in society's relations of hegemony. Since the crisis of Fordim, especially the growth of financial capital has produced a decisive change in the social relations of hegemony, which, in turn, contributed to the

---

<sup>27</sup> These transformations of labour and especially their equally contradictory character are analysed in more detail in the following sections.

<sup>28</sup> Similar to the above definition for the mode of production, the regime of accumulation refers to the forms in which production and labour are organised and to the specific technologies this organisation is based on. In addition, the mode of regulation describes the social, political and ideological mechanisms and institutions that organise the reproduction of a specific regime of accumulation and its social formation. These central terms of regulation theory were developed with reference to Gramsci's analysis of the formation of a Fordist mode of production in Italy in the 1920s. Crucially, Gramsci focussed on the role of state regulations and cultural norms. Regulation theory, in turn, coined these terms mostly in confrontation with the crisis of Fordism since the 1970s. For an overview of the concepts of regulation theory, see for example Brenner/Glick (1999), Häusler/Hirsch (1987), or Gruppe Demontage (1998: 19ff).

affirmation of neoliberal politics.<sup>29</sup> Financial actors and interests have gained increasing influence over the economy, politics, and society, as a whole. Shareholder interests in growing dividends are translated into an imperative of efficiency and competitiveness, maximum profitability, and liquidity. This imperative is transferred to the ‘real’ economy and reflected in the different levels of transformations in the mode of production mentioned above. Moreover, it is applied to the public sector, as well as the political regulations of economy and labour. In a word, these multiple transfers and affirmations of the imperative of efficiency, competitiveness and profitability constitute the core element of neoliberal hegemony (Hirsch 200; Jessop 2001; Dörre 2009: 41-47).

Regarding the labour process, this neoliberal hegemony promotes management strategies to reduce labour costs, to flexibilise and intensify labour, and to globally relocate production processes according to where there are the lowest production costs. In consequence, labour conditions are increasingly put under pressure. This trend of growing pressure is affirmed also at the level of labour regulations, where the neoliberal performance imperative is used to legitimise more restrictive, asymmetrical forms and outcomes of collective bargaining, as well as cutbacks in social protection schemes and collective rights. Social and labour politics are reoriented according to the concept of ‘workfare’. They are not any longer based on the Fordist principle of mutual solidarity, but on the logic of performance merits. This shift goes hand in hand with increasing pressures to accept every kind of work and to initiate constant self-activation as a precondition for acquiring social rights. At the same time, control mechanisms, barriers and conditions to obtain social transfers, and access to public services become increasingly restrictive (Hirsch 1995; Gruppe Blauer Montag 2002, 2008).

Together with cut-backs, privatisations and an increasingly financially oriented management of public services<sup>30</sup>, these transformations of the state have been summarised under the label of the “competitive state” (Hirsch 1995). In sum, they aim at a double cost reduction regarding state regulations, as well as the availability of cheap labour. These politics of the

---

<sup>29</sup> The growth of the international financial economy has its origin in the over-accumulation and reallocation of profits from the Fordist economy, as these profits more and more exceeded reinvestment possibilities within the sphere of production. The fact that, in today’s financial economy, stock values might rise seemingly independently from the actual capital accounts of the concerned companies does not indicate any ‘immaterialisation’ of the economy. In contrast, it points to a shift in the respective rules for evaluation from real asset values to capitalised earning power, and thus, to the increasingly speculative character of stock values (Bischoff 2001: 32).

<sup>30</sup> Public services are equally affected by cutbacks which, first of all, take the form of privatisations. In addition, in this way, additional markets are opened up for profit-oriented business activities. More indirectly, restrictions in public services are fostered by the introduction of financially oriented accounting systems, and on a larger political arena by restrictive tax politics, increasing power of financial ministries, and independent central banks (Deppe 1997: 53; Hall 2000).

competitive state put into question the Fordist regulation of standard employment, the associated social security schemes and collective norms.

Together, the regulatory effects of the different levels of transformation described so far (at the level of the production process and the political regulation) can be said to produce a shift in social forms of control. While under the Fordist regime, integration was established by means of social recognition, material, and political participation, under Post-Fordism and neoliberal hegemony this is replaced by the disciplinary force of the market, coercive powers of the state, and ideological calls for self-responsibility and self-regulation (Dörre 2009: 62). The result is what Boltanski and Chiapello describe as the new spirit of capitalism - the genesis of a new ideological configuration based on supposed market laws, competition, and self-activation (Boltanski/Chiapello 2003). Yet, the hegemony of neoliberal politics is no reflection of economic necessities or efficiency, but “an expression of the social power of financial actors” (Dörre 2009: 60).

Financial capital gained this power by means of its enormous growth, the resulting financial power, its consequent direct influence on financial conditions, decision processes within firms, and its lobby power in politics, which has been further enhanced by the increased importance of governance processes within international and national politics. Moreover, neoliberal hegemony is based not only on the power and influence of financial actors, but on coalition building within neoconservative politics (Borg 2001; Candeias 2004; Harvey 2005). And, last but not least, it takes its force from the social consent it is capable of producing. It is, in fact, also built on the partial integration of criticisms and resistance to Fordism, above all, against standardisation of forms of work and life and the marginalisation of not strictly economic topics, such as gender or ecological politics (Boltanski/Chiapello 2003: 211ff).

Yet, this is only one side of the coin. On the other side, the strength of financial capital and neoliberal politics also reflects the weakness of organised labour interests - a weakness that has to be taken into account and confronted when it comes to searching for possibilities of enhancing the (collective) action potential of employees. This weakness is linked to both the functioning of the former Fordist mode of production, as well as to its crisis. To an important extent, the Fordist class compromise has been obtained through labour struggles.<sup>31</sup> Yet, the integration of the labour movement within its pacifying corporatist institutions also produced

---

<sup>31</sup> As Birke et al argue, these struggles did not start in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but accompanied all post-war Fordism. They found their expression not only in (union) struggles for better pay and working conditions, but also in an escape from the factories, in workers' daily practices of sabotage, resistance, and absenteeism, and in a criticism of the Fordist wage labour condition as such. The Fordist class compromise pointed at pacifying, integrating or marginalising these forms of (shop floor) opposition (Birke/Novak/Stubbe 2004).

a loss of power resources for organised labour (Hirsch 1990: 102). Successful realisation of labour interests (and the defence of previously achieved collective standards) under Fordism has been bound to the ideology of performance justice (which, as is argued later, is highly connected to neoliberal imperatives of performance maximisation). Above all, it is restricted by the concertation-oriented forms of conflict channelling. These can function only in periods of economic growth and prosperity in which concessions are more easily obtained from capital – or, in the case of sufficiently strong power positions of labour and/or corresponding capital interests, to maintain once achieved compromises. In contrast, in a situation where the Fordist class compromise is put into question by capital, organised labour finds itself in a weak position of having to re-establish local, shop floor based strength and capacity to struggle. This proved to be all the more problematic as the neoliberal reorganisation of society, social politics, and labour relations leads to processes of precarisation, individualisation, and fragmentation of the working class - as is argued in more detail below. In consequence, labour's power positions and capacities for such a reorganisation are further weakened - be it with reference to individual workers at the workplace and in front of the welfare state, or to unions in collective bargaining and political regulation.

In conclusion, it should be stressed that, despite this hegemonic power, the neoliberal transformation of society does not establish any encompassing, total power system, but is itself full of contradictions, produces conflicts, and has to face resistance by subjects. The latest global crisis of the financial markets in 2008 and 2009 is an example of these internal contradictions, but also of the persisting hegemonic strength and the adaptability of neoliberalism.<sup>32</sup> The latter, in fact, is not automatically disrupted by any systemic crisis, but may be challenged only by social struggles and counter-hegemonic projects. That is why the daily experiences of contradictions and conflicts within the world of work (and beyond) as well as subjects' coping practices and action potential are so central for discerning possibilities of emancipatory development; and why they are put at the centre of the empirical inquiry under study here. Searching for possible breakpoints in neoliberal hegemony, from this perspective, also means searching for possible breakpoints and contradictions in subjects' common sense.

---

<sup>32</sup> While an important part of the (extra parliamentary) left saw in the financial crisis the end of neoliberalism or at least an opportunity to weaken neoliberal hegemony, in the political and public discourse, anti-neoliberal declarations and debates had a rather short conjuncture without substantial effects on politics. Yes, the state has been explicitly rediscovered as a useful regulatory actor, but only in the function of shock absorber for the (financial) economy - whereas resulting increased public deficits are again used as an argument for further restrictions in social politics. For an analysis of the financial crisis and a critical debate on its effects see for example Sciortino 2008b and Fumagalli/Mezzadra 2009.

On the backdrop of general social transformations described so far, the following sections will now look in more detail on changes in the world of work. This will be done by subsequently addressing the flexibilisation of employment relations, the organisation of labour processes and labour control, the specific insights of available subject-oriented research, and the particular features of retail labour. Special attention is paid in this literature review to fields and experiences of conflicts and contradictions, especially as regards the subject-oriented level of analysis. In fact, central for the new forms of social control and consent production, both on the level of the labour process and social regulations, is the reliance on an ambiguous mix of increased direct control and coercion, as well as a consent-producing ideological call for and integration of subjects' desires and capacities of self-regulation, self-responsibility, and self-control. The reactions of subjects to this ambiguous mix of required submission and self-regulation are central to the analysis of their action potential and possible breakpoints.

### *3.2 Flexibilisation of employment and labour markets*

#### *3.2.1 'A-typical' employment and its critique*

For a long time, the focus in studying processes of labour flexibilisation was on so-called 'a-typical' employment. This is defined in opposition to what is considered as a Fordist 'standard:' lifelong, full-time employment with fixed work hours during the day time and on regular work days (Monday to Friday or Saturday, from about 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.). Thus, 'a-typical' labour, originally refers to all sorts of part-time and temporary contracts, as well as those with flexible work times. Moreover, it includes different forms of subcontracting and quasi or pseudo self-employment.

Initially, there was a lively debate about whether the 'standard' employment was on a definite decline, or on the contrary, whether the growth of 'a-typical' employment would just be a temporary, 'a-typical' phenomenon due to an economic crisis (Mückenberger 1985; Bronstein 1991; Dombois 1999; Bosch 2001). Subsequently, the thesis of a dual labour market became prominent, divided into a privileged core of highly qualified, permanently employed persons and a disadvantaged periphery comprised of a diverse temporary and/or self-employed workforce (Harvey 1997; Paugam 2000). Simultaneously, a debate developed about labour market transitions from temporary to permanent employment (Schmid/Schömann 2003).

In the Italian context, both labour market polarization and transitions are also central topics (Contini et al. 1999; Esping-Andersen/Regini 2000; Booth/Francesconi et al. 2002; Bernardi 2003; Frey/Pappadà 2003; Icchino 2003; Gagliarducci 2004; Bertolini/Rizza 2005;

Barbieri/Scherer 2006). As in other European contexts, a focus lies on the debate about good versus bad work; that is, on the effects of flexibilised labour markets on employment prospects and work conditions. Such research is to a large extent of quantitative nature. Analyses of quasi-subordinate forms of employment have an important place in this and reflect the specifics of Italian labour market regulations.<sup>33</sup> Specifically, this concerns the new category of freelance ‘coordinated’ work, or project work.

A further element of the Italian discourse is the attention paid to territorial pacts. These are considered as newly emerging decentralised levels of flexible labour market regulations. The specificity of such local concertation practices is that they might involve a large variety of actors on a territorial and, hence, cross-sector basis. Beyond different levels of state institutions, unions, and employer associations, this also comprises diverse stakeholders from civil society (Regalia/Regini 2002; Regalia 2006).

The focus on ‘a-typical’ labour, however, is highly problematic with its inherently dualist lines of analysis. In fact, behind the distinction between ‘a-typical’ and ‘standard’ forms of labour lies a second opposition between flexibilisation and precarisation. The debate on labour market effects of employment flexibilisation is centred on these dualist lines: Either the positive effects of labour market flexibilisation are praised as making progress in terms of economic efficiency and employment creation, or flexible labour is solely interpreted as precarious, that is, as unstable, insecure, uncertain, and an overall negative form of labour. In line with the concept of dual labour markets, processes of precarisation are perceived as shifts towards more frequently using low qualified and low paid ‘a-typical’ labour. Positive flexibilisation, in contrast, is associated with high-qualified, creative, and knowledgeable labour.

Such dualist views are based on a naturalised and ahistorical concept of Fordist standard employment as well as current flexibilisation and precarisation. Both labour market flexibilisation and its supposed positive employment effects can appear as a given, an economic necessity for enhancing efficiency and competitiveness. An ahistorical understanding emerges where precarious labour is presented as decisively new and different, and/or by the attribute of ‘a-typical,’ as a deviation and a somehow accidental, temporary affair. This is also the case where Fordist labour standards are taken as a given norm from

---

<sup>33</sup> A central and initial step in labour market flexibilisation, besides the legalisation of interim labour, was the introduction of quasi-subordinate work as a new legal category between subordinate employment and autonomous professionals. For a more detailed description of Italian context conditions, and particularly its labour market regulations see chapter four.

which to distinguish new forms of labour – regardless of whether they are interpreted as positive or negative trends. Instead, both the development of Fordist ‘standard’ employment, as well as flexible or precarious forms of labour, must be situated within their historical context of capitalist modes of production and the respective hegemonic struggles.

Precariousness is not a new phenomenon, rather it has characterised most of the wage labour history. In contrast, the stabilisation of work and employment conditions and their buffering by social security schemes during Fordism has to be interpreted as the temporary result of a historically specific constellation - and not as any ‘normal’ state of capitalist labour. It was a reaction to the crisis of the former mode of production and, as such, also a result of collective struggles of the labour movement. In capitalism any aspects of the labour process and the employment relationship that are superfluous to the profitable transformation of labour power into labour – concerning a specific mode of production and under the condition of specific relations of hegemony – are structurally insecure and precarious. That is, they depend on concrete, continuous interest struggles. Thus, it is only during the ‘golden age’ of Fordism (1950s to 1970s) and only in the industrialised countries that work and employment conditions have been stabilised and buffered by social security schemes and collective rights (such as employment protection and limited, regulated work times per day and week). At the same time, Fordist stabilisation had more to do with ‘normalisation’ than with ‘normality’, as it exercised pressures to adapt to standardised and gendered work and life biographies while marginalising other forms and understandings of work and life (Castel 1995; Büro für angenehme Lebensweise 2004; Hauer 2007).<sup>34</sup>

Since the 1970s, these previously obtained security standards and limits of labour exploitation have been under attack. Consequently, precariousness has spread again and this time also to the sphere of formally regulated, standardised labour. While these standards have always concerned only a dominantly male and white ‘core’ workforce in the industrialised western countries, to a large extent, female labour has always been precarious. It is women who carry out most of the unpaid reproductive, house, and care work. Regarding wage work, labour markets are characterised by gendered segmentation and segregation. Women earn less for the same kind of work and are overrepresented in low paid and low qualified jobs. As such, many authors speak of a ‘feminisation’ of work with respect to the current rise in precarious labour conditions (Jenson et al. 1988; Morini 2007).<sup>35</sup> Considering work conditions in the global

---

<sup>34</sup> As Birke et al. point out, such normalisation also constitutes a form of conflict channelling and contributes to the above mentioned pacifying of labour struggles.

<sup>35</sup> Feminisation refers to several levels of transformations including and beyond the growing precarisation of employment conditions. This comprises the massive entrance into the labour market of women and, thus, the rising female employment rate, as well as the growing relevance of supposedly female labour capacities of

south, as well as migrant labour within the western countries, exploitation and competitiveness have always been based on reduced labour costs and on inferior, precarious labour standards (Delapina 1997; Parnreiter 1997). Yet, precarious labour conditions have always persisted during Fordism even among the white, male workforce in industrialised countries. Such conditions have been simply marginalised, both in quantitative as well as in social terms. In fact, precarisation returned as a mass-phenomenon also within this worker category with the crisis of Fordism. Dörre speaks of a shift in the character of precariousness: There would be a rise of “discriminating precarity” in contrast to the former Fordist form of “marginal precarity” (Dörre 2009: 45; Paugam 2008).<sup>36</sup>

The criticised dualist, ahistorical opposition between flexibilisation versus precarisation, as well as between standard and ‘a-typical’ labour, can be maintained only by means of a limited definition of precarious employment. In order to assess the effects of current flexibilisation and liberalisation processes on work conditions, one must consider not only employment contracts and work times, but also further aspects of the employment status and the work organisation. These include the wage development, labour market positions and availability of employment alternatives, access to professional development and training, work process related work conditions such as health and safety, stress levels, control and autonomy, and, last but not least, access to social recognition and social status as a wage worker (Castel 1995), and, thus, to social security schemes and collective rights (both in terms of limits for labour requirements and collective interest representation). Therefore, the proposition here is to understand precarisation as leading to unstable, insecure, and uncertain work and employment conditions at any of these levels. This could be due to temporary, minor or quasi-subordinate forms of employment, flexible or low wages, irregular work times, reduced access to professional growth opportunities, unstable work identities, obstacles to life course planning, as well as lacking access to social security schemes, collective interest representation or social recognition (Mayer-Ahuja 2003; Candeias 2004; Armano 2005; Dörre et al. 2006; Regalia 2006). The ILO uses a similarly encompassing definition of precarious employment as all such forms of labour which, due to their employment status, offer little employment protection, limited influence on the concrete work situation, only partial protection under

---

relational, communicative, and emotional labour, which is associated with the growing service and network economy. This latter argument is easily critiqued, as it relies on a naturalist perception of supposedly typically ‘female’ attributes, although these are established by socially constructed gender roles and hierarchies.

<sup>36</sup> The distinction among these terms is partly misleading. Being in a precarious employment position was a discriminating experience also during Fordism, as the term ‘marginalisation’ in its qualitative sense indicates.



labour law, and/or are insufficiently compensated to cover basic material needs for subsistence (Vogel 2009).

Such a wider definition renders visible how precarisation also affects Fordist ‘standard employment’ and transforms it ‘from within’ (Rubery 1999; Kratzer 2003). Flexibilisation has direct and destabilising effects on permanent employees in terms of work times, tasks, places or incomes – not least by eroding borders between work and life (Minssen 2000; Morini 2010). In a first instance, such an enlarged understanding of precarisation simply takes account of different levels of flexibilisation, which are usually distinguished within academic debate: numerical flexibility regarding employment contracts, temporal flexibility of work times, functional flexibility regarding work tasks and organisation, spatial flexibility referring to workplaces and patterns of mobility, and, finally, flexibility of wages in form of performance-related pay (Atkinson 1984; Esping-Andersen/Regini 2000).<sup>37</sup> For example, by distinguishing between quantitative and qualitative flexibility, Gallino underlines the precarising effects of temporal flexibility as it leads to an intensification and densification of labour requirements (Gallino 2001).

More indirectly, such a spread of flexibilisation and precarisation within Fordist ‘standard employment’ and/or respective destabilising experiences result from constant benchmarking processes within firms, from an increasing transfer of market pressures directly onto the employees and from rising requirements of self-regulation and self-responsibility (particularly where actual decision powers and resources to fulfil such requirements remain limited), or from increasing stress caused by intensified work processes and strict supervision. In other words, transformations of the labour process and different forms of control (which are described in more detail below) also have precarising effects. Finally, experiences of precarisation are equally generated by a social context of high unemployment levels, massive rationalisation strategies, reduced labour market alternatives, as well as by spreading low wage sectors and restrictive labour and social politics. Because, these developments increase the destabilising effects of a possible future loss of a current employment position (Hauer

---

<sup>37</sup> Harvey’s centre-periphery model of flexible labour markets also refers to a differentiation between functional and numerical flexibility. Already this concept takes account some fluidity between the ‘core’ and the ‘periphery’ of the labour market. The dividing line then runs along the different types of flexibility: The centre is constituted by the dependent, permanently, and full-time employees who are seen as exposed to geographic mobility and functional flexibility. The periphery is conceptualised as being subject to numerical flexibility. This includes full-time employees with qualifications easily substituted on the labour market, as well as those with minor, occasional or temporary employment contracts (Harvey 1997). What is still not taken into account in this model is the way even the core workforce is subject to numerical flexibility in a context of mass unemployment and enforced rationalisation processes, be this on the level of a psychologically experienced insecurity or an implicit or explicit threat from management.

2004, 2005b). That is, precarisation also results from the context condition of neoliberal regulation.<sup>38</sup>

### 3.2.2 General processes of precarisation

Taking into account these multilevel processes of destabilisation, I argue that current trends of precarisation should be considered as a general and gradual process impacting the entire workforce (Parnreiter 1997; Cella 2001; Ballarino 2002; Candeias 2004; Stone 2004; Hauer 2005a).

The issue at stake is not to postulate a dominance of (negative) precarisation over (positive) flexibilisation. In contrast to any such ‘either-or’ alternative, the aim is a dialectic understanding of the linkages and mutual conditioning of both processes. Precarisation defines an objective, structural development of work conditions and class positions, and not any subjective or moral evaluation of flexibilisation effects. It is meant to assess patterns of insecurity, uncertainty, and instability as they occur across different forms of work – and not to describe one special, distinct type of labour.

As workers’ resistance against Taylorist work organisation and the growth of new social movements (who are among others claiming increased space for self-realisation) have shown, from the point of view of living conditions, flexibilisation is not simply a negative, precarising process. Instead, it initiates contradictory processes of individualisation. Whether such individualisation has negative or positive effects on working and living conditions, and on a subject’s disposal over these, is a question of the conditions and outcomes of interest struggles and power relations. Under the current conditions of neoliberal hegemony and the reregulating of labour and social politics, flexibilisation and individualisation are linked to a loss of collective protections (regarding the limits of labour requirements and exploitation, as well as the social security schemes) and a re-commodification of an individual’s labour power. Objectively, they produce precarisation in terms of social vulnerability (Castel 2005). Castel, therefore, speaks of a ‘negative individualisation’.

Such vulnerability has numerous effects. It exceeds the sphere of work and affects the entire life conditions, destabilising daily work-life balances, as well as the ability to do life course planning. It also has negative, precarising effects on collective action potential and collective struggle capacities and, thus, on the distribution of power positions. This is all the more

---

<sup>38</sup> The ILO definition points to the relevance of these two latter aspects of labour processes and labour market conditions when insisting on the issue of one’s own control over work conditions and contexts.

relevant as flexibilisation produces a fragmentation of the working class, as well as of individual work biographies and identities (Fullin 2004).

Nonetheless, regarding the explanatory power of the term, the expedience of such a broad understanding of precarisation is obviously debatable. The more the term is widened, the more it might lose its capacity to capture the specificity of today's work and employment conditions and their transformation in comparison to former periods. Yet, I believe that this extension and even the seemingly lack of specificity adds value to the term. It allows uncovering and underlining the normal character of precarisation pressures within the capitalist labour process, structured as it is by imperatives of exploitation and profit maximisation.<sup>39</sup>

Notwithstanding this generalised character, current precarisation constitutes a gradual, diversified process. That is, it impacts different workforce groups and fractions differently. Especially affected by precarious work and employment conditions are young workers seeking labour market entrance, as well as women and migrants, who are concerned by gendered and racial lines of labour market regulations. The generalisation or 'normalisation' of precarious work conditions does not imply any homogenisation of the working class. On the contrary, the labour market is more and more fragmented and also polarised. Castells describes the development of flexible forms of work and employment as an only vaguely defined "patchwork" (Castells 1998). Far from representing a casual or incoherent development, or simply a neutral growth in complexity, this "patchwork" has its sense. The multiplicity of more or less flexible forms of work reflects the ever specific requirements of various different parts of fragmented production processes and the respective profit strategies (Candeias 2001). Heterogeneous forms of employment do not exist separately. Instead, "the more precarious segments influence the more stable ones in terms of costs, rights, resources and perceptions" (Armano 2005; translation K.C.).

Regarding the Italian context, segmentation by age and cohort appears to be especially strong in European comparisons (Semenza 2004; Simonazzi/Villa 2007; Schizzerotto 2002; Barbieri/Scherer 2007). According to Murgia, "flexible forms of labour are the predominant if not the only way for young people to enter the labour market" (2007/8: 25; translation K.C.). Equally visible is gender discrimination, with women being overrepresented in all forms of

---

<sup>39</sup> Also on a quantitative level, it is reasonable to speak of precarisation as a normal process within current capitalism: Throughout the 1990s, a strong growth trend of flexible forms of employment in most European countries could be observed. These numbers have stabilised in the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which suggests a continuous rather than a temporary phenomenon (Regalia 2005).

flexible employment, more women than men holding short-term and low paid temporary contracts, and/or contracts with reduced social security coverage (Saraceno 2002, 2005; Semenza 2004; Bertolini 2006). Finally, territorial differences between Northern and Southern regions are important with respect to the issue of precarisation. Especially in the South, the economy relies on precarious illegal migrant labour to an important extent (Tiddi 2001; Reyneri 2002, 2002a; Sciortino 2008a).

An example from the German context of recent research that goes beyond the dualist divisions between supposed ‘standard’ and ‘a-typical’ labour is Castel’s and Dörre’s model of integration-disintegration (Castel 1995, 2005; Dörre 2004; Dörre et al. 2006; Castel/Dörre 2009). It is of particular interest to the research being pursued here as it does not only introduce more differentiated categories of flexible and precarious labour, but also tries to grasp the wider social effects of flexibilisation and precarisation. Beyond the labour market, integration is understood as referring to social status as a whole. A precarious social position, hence, is a position that does not offer a secure subsistence, equal access to social rights, opportunities for participation, and social integration (Dörre 2004: 379).<sup>40</sup>

Castel differentiates three zones of such integration-disintegration: integration, precarisation, and disassociation. The realm of precarisation itself comprises all sorts of ‘a-typical,’ flexible employment positions, dependent self-employment, as well as minor part-time and low paid ‘standard’ employment. Yet, both flexible employment and destabilisation are also present in the realm of integration. Beyond (still) secure and stable ‘standard’ employment, it includes highly qualified, sufficiently well-paid flexible self-employed people (for whom subsistence is an unproblematic issue), and ‘standard’ employment ‘at risk’ of a future job loss and/or social declassification. At the other end of the scale, the zone of disintegration refers to the unemployed or only sporadically employed who live in a constant situation of insufficient, insecure subsistence and exclusion from the labour market (Dörre et al 2006).

Each of these three zones entails aspects of relative destabilisation and disintegration. But, each also contains forms of relative inclusion and integration. On the one hand, this classification shows the general character of precarisation or destabilisation as cutting across all three zones. In fact, referring to the category of ‘zones’, instead of employee types, as a central unit of analysis, could be interpreted as an attempt to account for more diverse

---

<sup>40</sup> In Dörre’s terms, disintegration impacts the entire life context. It might entail (a) an inability to do life course planning and participate in continuous formation and professional development, (b) the internalisation of permanent insecurity and, thus, a non-integration into workplace communities, as well as (c) a disintegration from social networks and social relations, due to high performance requirements for re-integration at the work place and into the labour market.

experiences of precarisation within each category, as well as to have less rigid boundaries between the different zones. On the other hand, in Castel's and Dörre's terms, precarisation produces disintegration and destabilisation, but not exclusion. Precarious work and living conditions are part of the economic system, a purposefully produced and exploited 'exterior'. What is more, subjects themselves pursue 'secondary', alternative integration strategies in order to compensate for the disintegration and destabilisation they experience.<sup>41</sup>

This attention paid to a subject's own practices of integration is an important aspect of this approach. So far, available research about the subject effects of precarisation and flexible employment is still extremely limited. Such work primarily concerns the structural and political level (that is, the effects on work conditions, forms of labour control or regulations), but not a subject's own coping practices. Instead, in Castel's and Dörre's definition, subjective experiences become a basis for the definition of precarisation. The distinction between different zones of integration-disintegration is grounded in employees' subjective perceptions of their living conditions and social positions and reflects their active self-positioning within society.

Yet, despite this acknowledgement of the practices and orientations of subjects, precarisation remains a negative category, and the practices of integration and self-positioning of subjects are only 'secondary' forms. This focus on the negative effects of precarisation is useful to stress the intensification and densification of labour requirements and workforce exploitation, the loss of collective limits of exploitation, and the increasing social destabilisation and vulnerability. But, only to a limited extent does it take account of the ambiguous and, as is argued below, interlinked character of processes of precarisation and subjectification, and of a subject's appropriation of consequent requirements and opportunities of self-regulation. These categories of integration-disintegration maintain the tendency towards a dualist vision of flexible versus precarious labour. Thus, positive flexibilisation effects are confined to the zone of integration and its high qualified, well-paid forms of flexible labour. The zone of precarisation, with its more low qualified and/or low paid labour positions, seems to be invested only by the negative, destabilising consequences of flexibilisation processes. Experiences of precarisation for this zone would consequently be focussed on income and security related aspects of the employment relation. In the zone of integration, experiences of precarisation are considered either as 'only' qualitative aspects of the work process and the

---

<sup>41</sup> The term 'secondary integration' refers to a differentiation between integration on the basis of instrumental, material interests, namely in terms of income and social status received through 'standard' employment (primary integration), and integration based on expressive interests regarding work contents and self-realisation (secondary integration). See section 3.3.1 for a further presentation of this concept, as well as for a critique of the hierarchical understanding of these two forms of integration.

employment relation (such as its stress level). These are understood as risks and negative side effects of (potentially) positive flexibilisation, enhanced margins of autonomy and self-regulation. Or, existential, meaning income and security related aspects of precarisation are seen to only impact this zone as a future threat of social declassification. In contrast to this understanding, the point here is to insist on the importance of such existential, destabilising pressures for the self-evaluation of current labour positions also within this group. Vice versa, also highly precarious, socially disintegrated or marginalised subjects are not simply victims of precarisation, but still have an active role in coping with ambiguous social positionings. What has to be underscored here is that the claims of subjects (as well as society's ideological calls) for self-regulation, professional recognition, and other qualitative aspects of the labour relation play an important role in their coping practices.

### ***3.3 Subjectification and indirect labour control***

Turning from the issue of flexibilisation and precarisation of labour markets and employment to the labour process, this section addresses changing forms of work organisation and labour control. In this field, the focus of research has been on new forms of power and subjectivity at the work place. In the German discourse, the term 'subjectification' of labour has become prominent, whereas in the English speaking labour process debate, 'normative control' is used to grasp these developments. In Italy, instead of on concrete labour processes, the discussion centres on the rise of cognitive and immaterial labour as new hegemonic forms of labour. As this latter Post-Operaist research strand offers few concrete empirical analyses of labour processes (and subject practices within these), and largely remains on an abstract conceptual, philosophical level of analysis, it is considered here only in a brief final discussion (4.2.3). The English speaking debate on normative control is introduced in more detail with regard to the labour process debate only in section 3.4.2 when presenting the subject-oriented labour research. For, in that research strand, the focus is on the production of workplace consent and thus immediately on employee practices in the face management control. Consequently, the next section mostly concentrates on the German debate of subjectification, which is first presented (3.3.1) and then critically evaluated (3.3.2).

### 3.3.1 The German debate on the 'subjectification' of labour

'Subjectification' refers to an increased and pointed exploitation of employees' subjectivity within the labour process (Baethge 1991; Glibmann/Peters 2001: 26ff; Moldaschl/Voß 2002). It concerns employees' capacities of self-regulation and the translation of labour requirements emerging from the Post-Fordist mode of production onto the subject level. These capacities of self-regulation include creative problem solving, adaptation to flexible labour processes, as well as emotional labour in personal services. Most crucially, they comprise an employee's self-responsible striving to realise expected market performance. That is, the required self-regulation is framed by neoliberal imperatives of self-responsibility, competitiveness, as well as economic and financial efficiency, and is supposed to contribute to their realisation at the shop floor. Therefore, beyond indicating new labour requirements, the term 'subjectification' describes also a new form of labour control (Pongratz/Voß 2003), which consists in employees internalising labour requirements, performance expectations, and control.

Such an increased relevance of employees' capacities of self-regulation is induced and produced by a double process of decentralisation of labour processes (Moldaschl/Sauer 2000). On an organisational level, hierarchies are flattened and coordination of labour processes is handed down to the shop floor level to individual employees and/or work groups. Economic decentralisation, in turn, is achieved through a more direct exposure of each work group and individual employee to market competition. In terms of a management by objectives, labour processes are organised on the basis of financial ratios that are supposed to be achieved on the shop floor - such as goals for turnover, expenses (like labour costs), or profits. Market relations are introduced within the firm by creating profit centres and framing interactions between different departments as exchanges between sellers and customers. Consequently, the market becomes a "motor of permanent reorganisation of firm structures" and labour processes: Market processes are internalised within the organisational structure as pre-given imperatives and, at the same time, they are strategically used, organisationally formed, and staged (Sauer 2008: 613f). Moreover, on the individual level, success-based flexible wages, setting individual objectives, and a project-based distribution of work tasks (and/or contracts) indicate such economic and organisational decentralisation.

As a result of such double decentralisation, responsibility for work results and economic success is transferred directly onto employees. Simultaneously, labour control takes an indirect form, relying on diverse participatory management strategies. These are supposed to achieve the described responsabilisation, to create conditioned margins of autonomy within

the labour process, and to offer additional motivational and disciplinary tools. As Moldaschl and Sauer state, control is not achieved despite, but “by means of autonomy” (Moldaschl/Sauer 2000). Employees are given some autonomy, but at the same time they are held responsible for a specific, management defined ‘correct’ use of this autonomy. Organisational and economic decentralisation are central elements in this shift of responsibility. This particularly concerns performance evaluations based on economic success rather than on labour efforts, but also organisational measures such as total quality management, that is creating spaces where employees (can or must) contribute to ameliorating labour processes and business results.

Moreover, strategies of normative control and individualisation of labour relations serve as additional integrative mechanisms.<sup>42</sup> Normative control refers to creating a shared cultural frame that includes employees’ normative (justice) orientations and identitarian positionings. It is supposed to function “internally by engendering people with subjective attributes and dispositions, which are compatible with the maintenance of certain type of work organisation” (Fleming/Stablein, 1999:3; quoted from Lo 2000). One such strategy is corporate identity formation, which fosters a group or family identity with common interests, mutual responsibilities, and commitment (Rose 1999; Thompson 2004; Kunda 1995).

Individualised labour relations are visible in the development of more direct, personal relations between individual employees and superiors, an increasingly individualised shape of work conditions, or the calling on employees to act as responsible corporate actors. Hence, management strategies fostering individualisation, competition, group spirit, and social control are combined to foster a sense of responsibility and workforce alignment. All of these different management strategies of economic and organisational decentralisation, normative control, and individualisation are strongly interrelated, as in the case of individual goal agreements, which constitute both a form of economic responsabilisation and individualisation, and include normative calls on employees as responsible corporate actors.

---

<sup>42</sup> In the following, this whole range of tools is referred to as ‘participatory’ management strategies – even if such ‘participation’ is tailored according to management interests and, to a large extent, remains an empty, merely discursive and control-oriented promise when considered from employees, as the empirical investigation highlights. Using ‘participatory’ here does not (necessarily) indicate any increased disposal of employees over labour processes and work conditions. Instead, it stresses the focus of management strategies on employees’ self-responsible acting and on the latter’s explicit contribution to the coordination of labour processes and the achievement of economic success. As goals of management strategies, such offers of participation and self-responsibility are limited to a management-set frame of company interests and inscribed into the power relations at the shop floor. Yet, as strategies of integration, they are always also objects of conflict and appropriation by employees.



On the subject level, these indirect forms of labour control produce demands for self-regulation on the three levels of the labour process, the labour market, and the work-life balance. Within the labour process, the decisive change regards the form of control and power. It lies in the shift from hierarchical supervision towards internalised self-control described. Moreover, Fordist standardisation of employment biographies and life courses (as a tendency) are replaced by requirements of self-marketing (on the labour market) and self-management (of the coordination between work and life). Pongratz and Voß coined the term ‘self-entreplooyee’ to describe these increasing requirements of acting as a self-responsible entrepreneur of one’s own labour power. Beyond this level of external requirements, the concept is moreover meant to indicate a new ideal type of labour subjectivity that affects employees’ own orientations and work attitudes (Voß/Pongratz 1998; Voß 2002; Pongratz/Voß 2003).<sup>43</sup>

Parallel to this analysis of changing forms of power, subject requirements, and subjectivities, research on subjectification focusses on its effects on linkages between work and life, as well as on work conditions and exploitation. A central concept in this respect is that of “loosening of borders” (Voß 1998; Minssen 2000; Döhl u.a. 2000; Kratzer 2003; Gottschall/Voß 2005): Parallel to flexibilisation, also self-regulation and self-entrepreneurship produce a deterioration of clear boundaries between work and life in terms of time, space, and tasks. This deterioration of borders reflects the loss of clear limits of labour requirements, which is induced not only by flexibilisation and individualisation, but also through the internalisation of performance expectations and control. In fact, these processes mutually reinforce each other.

Regarding the effects on work conditions, subjectification fosters increased self-exploitation and “work without end” (Glißmann/Peters 2001). Increasing stress and conflicts can be supposed to grow in each employee, as hhe or she has to mediate in a self-responsible way between intrinsic and the firm’s interests, as well as between one’s own work and life needs. Subjectification, thus, leads to an internalisation of class conflict. It exposes employees to pressures of permanently activating and optimising the self in line with the neoliberal imperatives of efficiency, competitiveness, and performance maximisation (Dörre 2009). This

---

<sup>43</sup> Also regarding these employee orientations and interests, Pongratz and Voß differentiate between three levels: a) endogenous, expressive interests or orientations related to the intrinsic value of work itself (“usevalue-orientation”); b) exogenous expressive interests or orientations towards the relationship between work and life (“lifevalue-orientation”); and c) instrumental and expressive interests or orientations connected with an employee’s position on the labour market (“exchangevalue-orientation”). The ideal type of “entreplooyee” would then be characterised by a commitment to self-regulation on all three levels, that is to self-control within the work process, self-management of the work-life-balance, and self-economisation as a self-responsible management of one’s own labour power and labour market position.

increasing integration of subjectivity-bound capacities of self-regulation (flexible adaptation, creative problem solving, emotional labour, etc.) in the labour process is seen to cause a growth in the (self-)exploitation of employees' subjectivities, as (supposed) boundaries between employees' labour performance and their subjectivity get deteriorated (Moldaschl/Voß 2002; Kleemann et al 2002; Matuschek et al 2008).

However, subjectification also produces some autonomy gains in form of a widened scope of employees' participation in the labour process. As in the case of flexibilisation, the resulting de-standardisation of work realities, life courses, and daily work-life arrangements offers liberation from a Fordist normalisation (Pongratz/Voß 2003; Büro für angenehme Lebensweise 2004). But, the autonomy gains consist of a conditioned, management defined autonomy, serving specific corporate interests for more efficient labour exploitation and control. Hence, autonomy and self-exploitation are no oppositions. Instead, autonomy is an integral part in producing the dynamics of self-exploitation. At the same time, such limited and conditioned margins can be challenged by employees, all the more as they are expected to act as autonomous actors within the labour process.

Just the same as for flexibilisation and precarisation the point here is to insist in this contradictory character of the processes of subjectification. This contradictory character shows that changing forms of labour (control) and their effects on work conditions are bound to the outcome of interest struggles and power positions, also at the level of daily shop floor interactions. The decisive question in this respect is to which degree employees can dispose of and effectuate their own control over new forms of flexibility and autonomy according to their own needs and interests, and to which degree these are imposed on them and dominated by firm interests.

Similarly contradictory effects emerge with regard to employees' collective action potential as basis for struggling over their own control. As suggested above, pressures towards self-exploitation might be interpreted as precarising, destabilising effects of subjectification in terms of social vulnerability and 'negative individualisation', and, thus, as resulting from the loss of collective protections and labour standards that set legal limits on exploitation (Castel 1995). Moreover, as subjectification is based on competition and isolating, individualised responsibility for market success, it is generally expected to cause additional negative effects on collective agency and solidarity at the workplace (Castells 1998; Boes/Baukrowitz 2002). At the same time, fostering a group spirit and self-responsible cooperation within labour processes might also produce new forms of and needs for solidarity (Trautwein-Kalms 1995; Schumann 2001). Again, this double movement should not be understood as an either-or

alternative, but as a simultaneous, interlinked, mutually constituting, and limiting development.

### 3.3.2 Critical assessment: self-regulation as a general requirement

Turning to a critical reflection of the concept of subjectification, it is important to note that this is usually understood as reflecting a distinction from Fordism and its Taylorist forms of work organisation. The latter is portrayed as a strictly hierarchically structured workplace regime with fragmented, standardised, strictly supervised labour processes, and in which employees are perceived as passive receivers of orders. Subjectification is interpreted as a clear opposition to this old form of Taylorism, as well as to currently equally emerging Neo-Taylorist forms of re-standardisation and reinforcement of direct control. Such a re-Taylorisation crucially relies on new IT and communication technologies (Ritzer 1996; Niepce/Mollemann 1998; Castells 1998; Springer 1999; Schumann 2003). Similar to the distinction between flexibilisation and precarisation, these two simultaneous developments most often are attributed to distinct sectors: subjectification is seen as concerning all sorts of highly qualified ‘knowledge’ work (and emotional labour) especially in high-tech sectors (and personal services); Neo-Taylorism as referring to low qualified labour in ‘old’ industrial sectors and services.

Yet, again, such a dualist perspective neglects to consider the historical character, and the combination of breaks and continuities in the development of new modes of production. There is no radical shift between Fordist and Post-Fordist, subjectified forms of labour, nor are Neo-Taylorism and subjectification merely opposite trends. On the one hand, several studies on subjectification highlight the importance of mechanisms of indirect control, also for medium and low qualified work (Pongratz/Voß 2003; Kratzer 2003). On the other, employees’ subjectivity and their self-actuating, self-regulating agency was also important within a Taylorist work organisation. During Taylorism, employees were not only passive, externally constrained recipients of orders. Instead, they had to show some self-control in order to realise the required labour performances and particularly the self-restraint required within standardised, alienating labour processes, as these largely exclude subjective development, needs, and interests. Hence, Taylorist control also had to rely on specific positive performance orientations of employees (Matuschek 2008; Menz 2009).

Considering the theoretical reflections above, all labour processes always have to rely on the realisation of human labour capacities. But, each unique work organisation requires particular

capacities. In the context of subjectification, flexibilisation, and neoliberal re-regulation of labour, these central human labour capacities are considered to be a subject's capacities of self-regulation. More precisely, what is new is that already existing self-regulation is now rendered explicit and turned into a constant requirement. The result is an "ideologically inflated selective activation of employees' capacities' of self-regulation" (Matuschek et al 2008: 55; translation K.C.). Moreover, the required self-regulation is framed in a specific way: as self-responsibility for economic efficiency and competitiveness. Consequently, Post-Fordist subjectification produces a marketisation and individualisation of a subject's development and capacities. This follows the previously indicated goals of rationalisation, adaptation to new technological and organisational requirements, and reestablishment of control on the shop floor.

A similar critique is that the debate on 'subjectification' usually depicts an employee's subjectivity as something external to the labour process. Yet, as pointed out by Pfeiffer and Menz, subjects' capacities of labour are produced within all of their life activities. That is, capacities of labour always regard the whole person. At the same time, the labour process never involves this whole person but only the specific capacities required for its realisation (Pfeiffer 2003: 195f; Menz 2009: 122f). As indicated above<sup>44</sup>, such a dialectic understanding is important as it opens up space for analysing subjects' the action potential. and This means to ask for the capacities and options employees have to to dispose over their work and living conditions – instead of limiting the analysis, in a passivating way, to merely identifying an increased exploitation (as a result of eroding of borders between work and life and the colonisation of employees supposedly external self).

This criticism notwithstanding, concepts such as Dörre's "finanzkapitalistische Landnahme" ("financial capitalist land seizures", that is the appropriation of social resources by financial capital; English translation K.C.)<sup>45</sup> are still relevant and useful, although they insist on management's supposedly extended grip over employees' subjectivity. As argued above, they are useful, because they underline the exploitive dynamics and the persistent class conflicts inherent in the current restructuring of work and employment, namely against hegemonic discourses of liberating self-responsibility, ideologically inflated participatory management discourses, and reductive concepts of knowledge labour. Yet, this is what the dialectic

---

<sup>44</sup> See chapter 2.4.

<sup>45</sup> With this term, Dörre stresses the negative, precarious, and exploiting effects of financial capitalism on work conditions. These result from financial capital's imperative of competition, marketisation, and efficiency in all economic sectors and social spheres and its introduction within the labour process (Dörre 2009, 2009a).

understanding of subjects' labour capacities (as well as the insistence in the contradictory effects of subjectification) is necessary for: This exploitation is no simple top-down process. In contrast, as with any form of control, it is equally based on the consent of employees and it simultaneously entails potential conflict and appropriation. Indeed, the term subjectification points to the fact that both management's power position and effective workforce alignment crucially depend on the successful integration of conflict potentials and employees' intrinsic interests in flexibility and self-regulation.<sup>46</sup> If, from the employees side, capacities of self-regulation and autonomous agency do not have to be implemented by an external force but are present as intrinsic interests and needs (of developing capacities of labour, and more generally of acting and coping with social requirements), they do not necessarily fit neoliberal marketisation and/or the tight frame of management induced autonomy margins. Hence, everyday conflicts can be expected to emerge, in which a subject's own understandings of self-regulation, control, and autonomy become effective as coping practices.

Reflecting this double criticism, the argument here is that these changing dynamics of exploitation, integration, and conflict can only be understood by analysing the linkages between Neo-Taylorism and participatory management strategies, between direct and indirect control and, moreover, between precarisation and subjectification.

Instead of opposed trends, from a historical perspective, the development of different forms of Neo-Taylorist and subjectifying work organisation can be analysed as struggles over hegemony - both on a social and a subjective level (the latter regarding workforce alignment within the labour process). These struggles can be perceived also as processes of trial and error: As experimentations about what kinds of control mechanisms prove enforceable and efficient. New forms of control have developed not least in reaction to social struggles questioning Fordist hegemony. During the late 1970s and 1980s, there was a period of competition between the two different models especially in industry. Since the mid-1990s, a process of "forced alignment" has been occurring under the hegemony of rationalisation pressures (Candeias 2001). This "forced alignment", however, has not resulted in a homogenisation of patterns of work organisation across and within sectors. Instead, as argued with respect to the multiple processes of flexibilisation, particular, differentiated combination

---

<sup>46</sup> As Sauer points out, the debate on autonomy is to a large extent focussed on the effects of exploitation without sufficiently recognising that this management strategy entails more than a pseudo autonomy. Instead, the production of consent to neoliberal performance requirements would necessitate some real offers of participation and autonomy, such as the partial realisation of classic labour claims for organisational decentralisation, flattened hierarchies, reduced sanctions, and increased autonomy (Sauer 2008).

of both strategies are developed according to the concrete requirements and opportunities of specific work processes and regulatory contexts.

One example of these combinations and linkages between Neo-Taylorism and subjectification is the introduction of standardisation within the IT-labour field, such as the use of fixed, pre-given modules within supposedly creative, self-regulated, highly qualified programming work (Boes/Baukrowitz 2002). The other way round, subjectification also plays a role in low qualified, repetitive, and tightly controlled forms of service labour. This is the case in call centres, as a standard example of a Neo-Taylorist work organisation. With regards to retail labour, it can be argued that the renewed relevance of service quality and interactions (resulting from rising competition) requires not only margins for self-regulation but also specific indirect management control. In their study on call centre labour, Matuschek et al use the term “subjectified Taylorism” to qualify such targeted combinations of direct and indirect control within a context of low qualified service labour (Matuschek 2008). Similarly, Artus develops the concept of “repressive integration” to assess the mix of repressive control and forced participation she considers typical for precarious service labour (Artus 2008, 2008a).<sup>47</sup>

In the call centres analysed by Matuschek et al, margins of autonomy and spontaneous adaptation in the interaction with customers are provided for by informal readjustments of labour requirements and guidelines, which are tolerated or even supported by management. Moreover, workforce alignment is based also in this Neo-Taylorist context on diverse motivational and at the same time disciplinary mechanisms of indirect control such as management by objectives, flexible wage components, participatory management discourses or reliance on informal channels of communication to create a better work atmosphere.

Artus’ concept of ‘repressive integration,’ comes from empirical research in various sectors of precarious (low paid and low qualified, easily substitutable) service labour, and particularly from two case studies on restaurant and transportation companies. She argues that this combination of enforced, direct, repressive control and subjectivity-oriented, cultural, integrative management strategies represents no contradiction but rather a functional strategic choice. It aims to smooth possibly disruptive experiences of enforced precarisation, repression, and exploitation by satisfying some of the employees’ needs for recognition, which become especially virulent in such a socially marginalised and precarious labour segment. Artus found the following important elements of such forced integration: First, an emphatic corporate

---

<sup>47</sup> These studies are revisited in more detail for their analysis of employees’ coping practices when presenting empirical subject-oriented research on the labour process (3.4). The issue of call centre labour as an example of frontline service labour is considered again as part of the emotional labour debate (3.4.2). For an overview over the development of work organisation and control in retailing see also section 4.1.

identity, which postulates the firm as a team and family, insists in an ethic of mutual duties and loyalty to the company, and, as a result, constitutes the corporate interest community as a totalitarian ideology. Second, more distinctions are introduced between different, highly fragmented levels of hierarchies, combined with visible forms of symbolic recognition, collective rituals for specific levels of this hierarchy (such as cultural events for management only), special training and socialisation of management, but also opportunities for professional growth (under the condition of absolute company loyalty). Third, a gradual, differential integration of all staff into corporate identity formation occurs through specific mechanisms of communication and participation, such as regulars' tables for employees, workforce surveys about the work atmosphere, an open-door policy, and an anonymous hotline for employee complaints (again, under the condition of loyalty and a strictly individual conflict definition). Finally, these both hierarchical and participatory forms of labour control are combined with a strict repression of any collective interest representation. This is achieved through a systematic presentation of unions and shop floor delegates as aliens threatening the common corporate identity, by pointed discrimination, dismissal of shop floor activists (with or without a severance pay), by closing shops in case of shop steward elections, or by attempting to fill work committees with company-loyal candidates from middle management and strictly sanctioning any management-critical statements and activities.

This double mechanism of direct and indirect control is also retraced for the retail labour process. While Ferreras (2003/4, 2007) insists in the authoritarian character of the retail workplace regime in her ethnographical study on work attitudes of cashiers in Belgian supermarkets,<sup>48</sup> du Gay (1996) as well Voss-Dahn (2000) point to the relevance of participatory mechanisms. Curcio (2002) also insists in the repressive effects of these participatory mechanisms.

Voss-Dahn, analysing German retail structures, uses the example of participatory work time regulations. In her analysis, the specific requirements of customer service are seen to constitute a break in processes of flexibilisation and precarisation, creating an additional potential for employees to gain power.<sup>49</sup> As [Similar to](#) Artus' argumentation, normative control is used by management in reaction to these limits of flexibilisation as a tool to

---

<sup>48</sup> Aside from a participatory model of work time flexibilisation, normative control is largely disregarded in Ferreras' work. However, this might reflect the particular situation in the firms she studied.

<sup>49</sup> Despite distancing herself from dualist thinking about different forms of labour control, Voss-Dahn's argument gives little attention to the fact that management's service orientation itself also represents a driving force towards flexibilisation.

enhance employees' consent to intensification. Consequently, employee participation in the establishment of timetables does not represent any humanistic approach, but rather an integrative strategy aimed at transferring responsibility and conflicts onto the employees. Of course, such participation might still entail some gains for employees in terms of control over their own work times.

In Voss-Dahn's analysis, authoritarian and participatory management strategies are perceived as rather distinct types of control, whereas du Gay underlines the intersections and mergers between them. In his case studies in British retailing, he uses the term "government of enterprise" to indicate a discursive regime of labour control based on participatory, normative management strategies that seek to constitute employees as "enterprising," i.e. self-responsible, market oriented, and performance maximising selves. Participatory opportunities here are described not only as means of integration by adopting some employee interests and increasing satisfaction. Moreover, they appear to be tools for identity formation in line with the company's interests. Consequently, they are interpreted as a form of authoritarian control over employees' selves - though this control is internalised and effectuated by employees' themselves.<sup>50</sup>

This authoritarian character of identity formation entailed in normative control mechanisms is even more accentuated in Curcio's interpretation of management strategies in an Italian supermarket chain. He speaks of a 'totalitarian firm' and 'totalitarian control' consisting of a mix of strict rules, high repression, and accentuated corporate identity formation. A strict code of conduct dictates employees' behaviour, as well as their looks, and above all the requirement of absolute availability to management's requests (especially for temporal and spatial flexibility). Norms for behaviour and looks entail a high degree of standardisation and de-personalisation, which is interpreted by Curcio as a sign for absolute control. Respect for rules is put into force by meticulous (public) punishment of any breaches, as well as by mobbing, group pressure, and social control. Curcio traces a high degree of daily experienced violence in employees' accounts of their work realities. Precarisation, the fear of losing one's job and the disciplinary power of customers (to be treated like a king) add to this repressive regime. In terms of collective and social relations at the workplace, the company policy is

---

<sup>50</sup> In some contrast to the term subjectification, du Gay's use of the concept of government insists not so much in the resulting requirements of self-regulation, but in their constraining form, as being dominated and conditioned by the management imperatives of market orientations, economic efficiency, and increased exploitation. Pointing to the connection between direct and indirect forms of control, the idea of a "government of enterprise" is, thus, similar to Artus' concept of a "repressive integration." On a theoretical level, the references to Foucault's term governmentality are evident.



equally repressive Communication with colleagues or customers as well as collective interest representation are suppressed. A purposefully created atmosphere of competition and struggle 'all against all' further discourages collective articulations.

While seeming to be contradictory, these repressive management strategies are complemented by and rely on extensive mechanisms of corporate identity formation: group spirit, commitment to a common goal, presenting the company as a family, and the myth of being employed in a particularly successful and important firm. The combination of these aspects of repression, competition, a charade culture, and team spirit in one and the same management strategy are no contradiction. The normative measures are oriented towards a forced identification with the company and a resulting commitment to and availability for its interests - but not to any autonomous interaction and effective participation. Besides such corporate identity measures, participatory management strategies offer the illusion of career advancement. In fact, also wWith regards to professional growth, there is a close interaction between integrative and repressive mechanisms. Career promises are combined with strictly disciplining employee behaviour with regular written performance and progress evaluations. Finally, in Curcio's terms, 'totalitarian' control comprises a mode of 'wicked exchange': One's own interests can be negotiated against the availability one is willing to give in face of company interests, but only as long as no rights are claimed by employees. Interpreting these patterns of shop floor negotiation beyond normative control, workforce alignment above all appears to be based on an individualised mode of labour relations. This aspect has been widely overlook in the other research presented on low qualified service and retail labour. Unfortunately, Curcio does not further investigate this issue. He might be accused of focussing too much on the totalitarian, repressive aspects and effects of management's control attempts - which, at the end, are only attempts that always also have to face employees' potential resistance. But, taking the present retail-related researchers together, participatory, normative control evidently takes a particularly repressive form in this sector.

In consequence of the linkages between direct and indirect forms of control and their spread across different sectors, subjectification and respective requirements of neoliberal self-regulation can be considered as generalised processes impacting all employee groups in all sectors - parallel to the above argued general trend towards precarisation. In this, subjectification and precarisation mutually reinforce each other. The most important precarising effects of subjectification dynamics are the loss of collective protections, clear limits and rules for the exploitation of labour, and the internalisation of responsibilities and

resulting tendencies of self-exploitation, as mentioned above. The other way around, processes of precarisation also foster requirements of self-regulation. Thus, an unstable employment status enhances the need for constant self-activation both within the work process (in order to demonstrate good performance as a precondition for renewing or stabilising an unstable employment position) and on the labour market (as self-responsibility for maintaining and increasing one's own labour market value). In addition, flexible employment positions, work times, and wages increase the need for self-management capacities regarding the daily work-life balance, as well as life course planning, - also in work places without extensive indirect control and participatory management strategies.

Beyond these mutually enforcing effects, precarisation, Neo-Taylorism, and subjectification work together in sustaining workforce alignment and control. More specifically, taking into account the current research on linked direct and indirect management strategies that has been presented, and Artus' concept of repressive integration, I argue that their combination is necessary to deal with the possible disruptive aspects of Post-Fordist forms of labour control. Precarisation furthers self-exploitation pressures and causes labour requirements to be internalised. This is not only a result, but also a functional pre-condition for the flexible, market-driven model of production as the inner dynamic of such a model is based on the re-commodification of labour. Step by step, precarisation produces this re-commodification (Dörre 2009). The other way around, subjectified labour control based on participatory management strategies sustains employees' consent to Neo-Taylorist labour intensification and control, to factually limited resources for the fulfilment of transferred responsibilities, and/or (as in Artus' argument) to precarious employment conditions. Through this combination, workplace hegemony becomes visible as a mix of consent and control. It is this combination, too, which is assumed here to produce potential contradictions and breaks within both the work organisation and employees' everyday experiences.

### 3.3.3 Excuse: Post-Operaist analysis of immaterial labour

In contrast to the German debate, in Italian labour studies there has been relatively few empirical research at the level of concrete labour process, work organisation, and control. Changing labour subjectivities are a central topic within Post-Operaism (Marazzi 1994; Lazzarato 1997; Negri 2001, 2004; Virno 2005), but these are discussed on a philosophical (rather than on an empirical) level and with respect to social relations of hegemony (rather than regarding concrete labour processes, empirical forms of control, and subject practices). In line with the Operaist tradition, the development of Post-Fordist forms of labour is

interpreted as a result of social conflicts and struggles over hegemony. Yet, whereas Operaism tried to combine the empirical analysis of labour processes (and specifically the production of consent and conflicts within these) with concrete interventions on the shop floor to enhance and organise collective agency and struggles,<sup>51</sup> Post-Operaism has lost this practical, activist impetus. Nonetheless, it still aims to create prospects and dynamics for advancing collective subjectivities and counter-hegemonic struggles.

In this attempt, immaterial labour is analysed as a new central form of labour. Intellect, knowledge, and experience are postulated as central productive forces of Post-Fordism. These comprise linguistic and communicative capacities, creative labour, and personal initiative. There is some parallel to the concept of subjectification as the production process is seen as based on the productive cooperation of subjects, and thus, on subjectivity related capacities, such as relational labour and self-regulation as self-entrepreneurs. Immaterial labour is understood as impacting all sectors and forms of labour, although its rise is particularly evident in the service economy and with new information technologies. Hence, it is contributing to the growth of not directly productive forms of labour as well as symbolic production. As a consequence of this development, work and non-work distinctions erode. Although this argument appears similar to the relaxing boundaries between work and life in the German debate, it has different connotations. The focus here is on the significance of intellectual human capacities of labour (language, memory, sociability, ethical and aesthetic orientations, etc.) within both spheres, and on the resulting identical productivity of work and non-work. As in the German debate on subjectification, these intellectual human capacities are supposed to be generated outside of the labour process. Through their exploitation within the latter, they are subordinated to capitalist rule.<sup>52</sup> But, reflecting a Marxist term sensual labour and taking on a perspective towards resistance, appropriation, and transformation, Post-Operaism holds that this exploitation of human capacities is never complete, as the productive cooperation is always bigger than what is employed in the labour process.

---

<sup>51</sup> Operaism has developed the militant research approach of 'co-research' where workers themselves investigate their own work conditions with the goal of increasing their collective action potential. Operaism and militant research flourished alongside the labour movements of the late 1960s. Some of its central authors are Romano Alquati, Antonio Negri, Sergio Bologna, Raniero Panieri, and Mario Tronti. In that time, the leftist journals 'Quaderni rossi' and 'Classe operaia' were important forums for the discussion of Operaist theory and practice. Operaist analysis insists in the driving force of labour struggles in the transformation of production regimes and labour subjectivities - away from the Fordist mass-worker towards automation, externalisation, precarisation and, in Post-Operaist terms, increasing cognitive labour.

<sup>52</sup> A central concept here is that of 'domestication.' It refers to overlapping work and non-work times, as well as work places and living places, which produces a mix of autonomy and invisible subordination. Bologna and Fumagalli developed this concept in their analysis of what they call "self-employment of the second generation," a form of autonomous labour that is based on a reduced means of production and carried out in quasi-subordinated forms (Bologna/Fumagalli 1997).

A critique that can be lodged against this approach is that it is equally marked by a dualist opposition between a Fordist and Post-Fordist economy and respective labour subjectivities. However, the attention paid to collective subjectivities is of particular interest for the research questions posed in this study. This insistence is especially valuable as it points to the existence of liberating developments within the current transformations of labour potentially producing new collective subjectivities. Thus, collective subjectivities and agency do not have to be developed from outside but emerge as possibilities within current labour processes. This constitutes an important counter point to the submission and exploitation focussed discourse within German labour studies.<sup>53</sup> But, Post-Operaism easily takes an ontological stand from which the liberating revolutionary process seems to be already achieved or at least necessarily entailed in the historical evolution of human labour. The intellect, thus, is analysed above all as an ontological capacity through which human existence and productive activities are set at one. In contrast, the persistence of classic forms of exploitation remains underevaluated. This is all the more problematic, as the praising of immaterial cognitive labour displays some striking parallels to the neoliberal ideology of knowledge work. While this could be interpreted as a reappropriation and transformation of these issues and terms, it still lacks an explicit analysis of the limited factual realisation of related human capacities under the given conditions of neoliberal hegemony.

### *3.4 Subject-oriented research: employees' experiences and coping practices*

The following literature review is structured according to the already known lines: first, addressing subject-oriented analyses dealing with employment positions; and second, turning to employees' practices within the labour process. Then, a separate section focusses on research in the retail sector. The research presented is viewed through the lense of the theoretical approach and its central concepts employed here. That is, the review concentrates on emerging fields of conflict, coping practices, and action potential, even if these were only implicitly addressed in these terms in the original studies.<sup>54</sup> For this purpose, the following

---

<sup>53</sup> On a theoretical level, Post-Operaism takes a critical stance towards such interpretations of Foucauldian theory, which is centred unilaterally on self-control and subordination.

<sup>54</sup> Consequently, if these studies in the following are criticised for a lacking analysis of such coping practices and action potential, it is of course to be taken into account that, most often, these issues have not been their main research interest. Yet, they are in the here pursued study, and from this perspective such a lack constitutes a relevant point of critique, and above all an important research gap.

coping patterns are distinguished: practices of appropriation, border drawing, and transferring and reducing experienced conflicts.

Despite the extensive research presented thus far on changing forms of work and employment, subject-oriented empirical analysis dealing with employees' reactions to these changes, their meaning constructions, and agency is still limited. There are particular shortcomings in terms of analysing coping practices and action potential. Research about employees' strategies for coping with labour requirements and control within the labour process (4.3.2) are currently prominent (only) within labour process studies (Hochschild 1983; Ezzy 2001; Bolton and Boyd 2003; Korczynski 2003; Llyod/Payne 2008) and in various rather dispersed studies on work attitudes and performance orientations (Saba et al 2006; Hall and Atkinson 2006). Such a subject-oriented focus remains underdeveloped also in the empirical works associated with the German debate on the subjectification of labour (Pongratz/Voß 2003). Some interesting findings about coping practices have emerged in the field of low qualified, precarious service labour (Matuschek et al 2008; Artus 2008, 2008a).

More commonly, subjects' reactions to changing forms of labour have been analysed with regard to employment flexibility (4.3.1). Such a focus includes experiences of employment instability, respective orientations, work attitudes, and identities, as well as the effects on work biographies and/or social integration. The following presentation on this matter concentrates on the Italian debate. Additionally, one central example from the German context is included (Dörre 2009). In the Italian context, qualitative sociological research is extremely marginalised in general, and so is also subject-oriented research in labour sociology. Hence, research on how employees cope with changing labour conditions mostly takes the form of quantitative inquiries and surveys based on standardised questionnaires (CENSIS 2003; Rieser 2004; Ferrari 2004; Porro 2004). More recently, promising biographic and ethnographic research strands are developing (Fullin 2004; Murgia 2010; Armano 2009, 2010). In both cases, the analysis mostly focusses on employees' subjective experiences of employment instability and respective orientations, work attitudes, and identities. Only part of the ethnographic studies directly address concrete coping practices within the labour process (Pentimalli 2009). This latter contribution is considered in the second subsection.

### 3.4.1 Subject-oriented research on the employment relationship

Starting with employment related subject-oriented studies, these collectively point to the insecurity of the future, the difficulty (or impossibility) of life course planning, and the persisting, long-term instability of employment conditions as central precarising experiences rendering unstable employment problematic for employees. The most important coping practices include: (a) orienting oneself towards permanent employment, nurturing transition expectations, and placing hope in the future; (b) a positive identification with the work contents as a strategy to compensate for negative experiences and to maintain positive self-representations - task satisfaction, recognition, and professional development as compensation for employment-related insecurities; and (c) practices that reduce the weight of current experiences of precarisation, such as normalisation, naturalisation, personalisation, comparison with others, or reinterpretation of constraints as one's own choice. These practices make employees do with with (current) precarious employment and living conditions. They produce a strong orientation towards the present, and simultaneous a transfer of (real) problems to the future. In practice, this way of coping tends towards a progressive adaptation of expectations.

Besides these adaptive coping practices, practices of individual border drawing are equally important in dealing with feelings of frustration, limited individual action potential, the permanent exposure to precarisation, and requirements for self-activation. These include the non-identification with a current job, maintaining a hidden disloyalty to the company, and focussing on self-realisation by furthering one's own qualifications and professional development, appear as a means to create distance between oneself and the precarious employment position, especially but not only among the segment of 'knowledge workers.' Employees' capacities to create positive self-representations prove central for both adaptive, and border drawing strategies, which result as interlinked.

Finally, a further important coping practice is the use of informal collective support networks and social relations, both among colleagues or co-professionals, and within the family. However, the action potential employees might gain with this mix of coping practices appears to be limited and itself precarious due to and the adverse effects of precarisation on social relations, support networks, and employees' capacities to perceive themselves as members of a collective, and the many individualised aspects in their risk-management.

Looking at the different studies in more detail, in a first step Italian survey-based research on employment-related attitudes is presented (CENSIS 2003; Rieser 2004; Ferrari 2004; Porro

2004). These studies particularly address the issue of para-subordinate employment (so-called ‘collaborations’). The Censis report only refers to so-called collaborators (‘CoCoCo’), while Rieser, Ferrari, and Porro equally integrate temporary employees (fixed-term employment, training contracts, and interim labour) into their sample. They all focus on highly qualified, mostly cognitive labour, except for Rieser, who covers a wide range of professions from different sectors.

These surveys highlight a strong tension between precarious workers’ satisfaction with current work contents and a consequent high self-esteem on the one hand, and their preoccupation for future employment conditions like stability and professional development, on the other.<sup>55</sup> The problems of unstable, temporary, and/or para-subordinate employment positions are met with strong transition expectations: The current employment position is seen as a temporary state, and thus, rendered acceptable. Moreover, this temporality is also partly appreciated and perceived as self-chosen. Yet, in the long run, these transition expectations, together with actual fragmented work biographies and lacking opportunities for professional development destabilise work identities, according to the surveys. This diagnosis seems at odds with the strongly detected self-esteem and content-related identification with work. But, continuous precariousness, fragmentation, and not-realised (initially aspired) professional development can be expected to erode this positive esteem and identification over time. In terms of the role of collective support, these surveys underline further ‘systemic risks’: an overload of family networks as economic support institutions and an absence of collective agency at the work place, despite a strong subjective importance attributed to collective interest representation and high expectations set in unions and shop stewards.

Among qualitative, interview-based studies, the work of Fullin (2004) is one of the few and probably the first in the Italian discourse that addresses in depth employees’ experiences and coping practices in the face of precarious employment, instead of taking employment orientations simply as a given, the way the mentioned quantitative surveys do. Her research is based on semi-structured in depth interviews with two different groups: interim labour and semi-autonomous workers in mostly cognitive, cultural, and social service professions (for example editors, translators, stenographers, educators). Fullin’s findings about the most common conflicts experienced and orientations displayed are similar to the survey studies.

According to Fullin, the most crucial mental strategy with which to face experiences of employment precariousness is the progressive adaptation of employees’ expectations in

---

<sup>55</sup> This is not only the case for semi-autonomous, highly qualified, cognitive workers. Instead, Rieser points to the relevance of work satisfaction across all considered employee groups, qualification levels, and sectors.

employment trajectories and work biographies to the constraints encountered. More precisely, she distinguishes the same two practices detected by the survey reports: Compensating satisfaction with current work tasks resulting in a hope for future stabilisation in the present job, and holding expectations for a future transition into a better job. Fullin insists on the role of such transition expectations as a means of non-identification with an undesired work situation: Satisfaction with the present (which is highlighted by the Censis report) can be displayed and maintained only by means of such non-identification.

While her research highlights the important function of such constructions of meaning for employees' capacities to cope with instability, Fullin equally stresses the limited efficiency and sustainability of these strategies. Non-identification carries with it the risk of getting stuck in a 'trap of precariousness' if these hopes in transition do not match real labour market opportunities. Going beyond the simple statement of similar systemic risks made by the quantitative survey studies, she offers a detailed description of how this 'trap' affects employees' subjectivities. In a situation of prolonged non-identification, employees lose their narrative capacities - the ability to give coherence and meaning to their life course and their identities, and thus, the ability to project themselves into the future and to pursue an active labour market strategy.

Fullin reveals a whole range of mental strategies in response to this (latent) conflict. First, there are different ways of making constraints appear natural, by attributing them either to market law or to the personal incapacity of managers. Constraints are also reinterpreted as positive factors. Having to take over responsibility for some part of the work process is experienced as a gratification, even where this transfer of responsibility does not correspond with a transfer of control over the resources necessary to deal with this responsibility. Corresponding with Walters' concept of "satisficing", this mental strategy clearly reflects the ambiguous character of flexibilisation and the way power functions through consent and integration of subordinates' interests. In this, Fullin stresses a subject's ability (and need) to create and maintain positive self-representations and to find or create sources of recognition even in frustrating contexts. In fact, a positive re-interpretation of experienced constraints offers opportunities to demonstrate or (mentally) insist in one's own competencies and to sustain self-esteem as a basis for work satisfaction and integration. As a third strategy, this mechanism can also be detected in the way employees use comparison with others as a way to reduce frustration with unsatisfactory work and employment situations. Comparison is limited to others with the same employment status, thus, excluding from the picture those who have achieved a more desirable employment situation. Moreover, it is used to stimulate the



continuing hope and striving for a better future, in the sense that comparison of work performances is used to distinguish oneself from colleagues as competitors. In this way, employees produce their own action potential as they transform experiences of competition from a threat and source of instability into a challenge.

Positive identification with the current work based on endogenous satisfaction might protect from the loss of narrative capacities associated with the 'trap of precariousness.' Yet, action potential is still limited in this case, since risks related to the employment instability (though moderated psychologically) remain individualised and dependent on individuals' capacities to work and sell their labour power. In fact, employees' mental strategies are not enough to cope effectively with the risks of individualisation. Instead, Fullin's study points to the importance of collective support networks to face and reduce instability, namely the family and professional networks. Yet, these collective strategies are themselves negatively affected by instability. Fullin's investigation affirms the risk of a systemic, threatening overload of family networks especially as financial support institutions, as pointed out by the survey reports. This is especially the case when parents have to financially support their children even at an age in which, under Fordist conditions, they would have been expected to be part of the core workforce and the main breadwinners of their own family. That such continuous support is itself a highly precarious affair is even more evident from a future perspective when it would be the turn of today's grown, precarious children, as parents and grandparents, to become the cornerstone of this network, but without having gained their own sufficiently stable and paid employment positions and pension entitlements. While employees are able to smooth out some negative experiences of instability and partly appropriate its positive aspects, on the long run, these abilities as well as their capacities to challenge and escape from this situation appear as rather limited and precarious.

Confirming the coping strategies found by Fullin, Murgia's (2010) more recent study on collaborators in public administrations and interim workers in retailing<sup>56</sup> distinguishes four different self-representations held by the precarious workers in her sample: For a first group, work represents a source of satisfaction and identity. For a second, professional instability is perceived as a temporary situation. Third, precarious employment is normalised as a dominant condition in the current society. Fourth, employees insist in the necessity to content themselves with such precarious conditions. Regarding this latter aspect, Murgia more clearly

---

<sup>56</sup> Murgia's research is presented here and not in the distinct section on retail labour, because what is of interest in this work is not so much the analysis of retail specific conditions of work and employment, but the insights in work identities of precarious workers across the two different sectors considered.

than Fullin takes account of actual constraints resulting from current labour market situations. Content with precarious employment positions is, thus, not only an adaptive mental coping practice, but also displays employees' considerable frustration with actual labour market opportunities. Of interest in Murgia's approach is that it draws the linkage between work attitudes and self-representations of precarious workers into the focus. Thus, it underlines the productive, subjectivity producing sense and effect of daily coping practices.<sup>57</sup>

Armano's research on temporary and/or (semi) self-employed knowledge workers (web and new media professionals) in Turin,<sup>58</sup> stresses two important additional aspects in this general panorama. First, it points to the importance of professional networks which are based on informal social relations and reach beyond the current temporary job engagement. Second, experiences of precarisation do not result from the temporary nature of contracts as such, but from the resulting necessity to constantly activate the self: The need to constantly manage and develop one's own professional and social capacities to stay in the network, as well as deal with a corresponding fear of 'falling behind'. While the relevance of professional networks might be specific for para-subordinate knowledge labour, the aspect of constant self-activation producing experiences of precarisation is of general interest here. It points to the precarising effects required of self-regulation. Third, also Armano's study found that self-realisation, work satisfaction, and self-esteem are central for employees' self-representations and their capacities to cope with experienced precarisation. But, she shows that, far from guaranteeing a devoted integration, this importance of content-related satisfaction can go hand in hand with an equally high degree of company disloyalty and a reduced identification with current jobs and employers. Insisting on self-realisation, work satisfaction, and one's own autonomous labour capacities can serve as powerful coping practices to create a distance between oneself and the firm, the current job, and its dissatisfying employment conditions and dependencies. Armano's conclusion is that precarious knowledge workers experience high degrees of informality and self-exploitation but no alienation. This is due to their (necessary, but also precarising) insistence on self-realisation, relational labour, and professional development.

---

<sup>57</sup> Besides this focus on self-representations and identity formation, the second theme of Murgia's work is biographical transitions between work and non-work as they are perceived by employees themselves. This concerns transitions throughout the entire life course (chronological perspective), as well as at the daily level (perspective of daily life). On the methodological level, Murgia uses an explicitly biographical approach, based on the analysis of narrative in depth interviews.

<sup>58</sup> Armano's study in the city of Turin addresses this local context as part of the research itself. An important aspect not further considered here is the inquiry into the Post-Fordist development of this metropolis' unique and changing mode of production.

Having considered the Italian contributions to the field of subject-oriented labour studies, the German context is now presented. As indicated above, Dörre's classification of different zones of integration goes an important step towards acknowledging subjective experiences. This classification is combined with an analysis of "subjective ways of coping with discriminating precarity" (Dörre 2009: 47ff, translated by K.C.). Referencing employees from various sectors, Dörre distinguishes between three types of employees practicing different forms of secondary integration. The latter represent alternative forms of integration developed in a situation of exclusion from the 'standard' integration through permanent full-time employment, but which still provide only limited social rights and status. The three employee-types are the "self-managers", the "creative precarious" and the "continuously discriminated precarious". The previously mentioned forms of cognitive coping are attributed to different groups of employees, who are distinguished by their employment and labour market positions. First, self-managers are highly qualified employees with extensive access to relevant resources who achieve integration at the work place through a strong identification with their problem-solving work tasks and contents, as well as through their own professional capacities. They compensate experiences of employment precarisation with their high intrinsic interest in (and their opportunities of) doing good work. In Dörre's words, they practice a task-related, subjectively meaningful integration.

Second, creative precarious employees are those for whom this direct compensation does not work, due to strong persisting experiences of employment precarisation, limited prospects of future stabilisation, professional recognition and development, as well as strong current dependencies which contradict the self-representation as autonomous professionals. Dörre here uses the example of researchers. For this group, integration is realised by means of transition expectations. In Dörre's words, employees' practice an "art of waiting". Again, this art consists in maintaining hope for future employment stabilisation, and thus, a perception of current precarisation as transitory. It is sustained by the reinterpretation of this continuous 'phase' as a period of personal and professional development. Finally, precarious, flexible employment is perceived as one's own choice and as a positive experience, compared to the standardised norms of Fordist wage labour.

Third, in the category of continuously discriminated precarious employees, coping occurs in the form of frustration, anger, and resignation. It is associated with the majority of precarious employees who suffer from both unstable employment positions and lacking relevant resources and margins for an effective self-management within the work process. The evident

disparity between precarious reality and aspired 'normality' in this case is so strong that it produces a distancing from work and a shift in the latter's subjective meaning, basically reducing it to a means of subsistence (and not of self-realisation). Moreover, it results in a profoundly precarious experience of employment as a permanent balancing act. In fact, as for Armano's knowledge workers, an important reason for experienced precarisation is not just the currently unstable employment position, but the permanent character of insecurity that produces constant self-activation pressures.

Finally, regarding collective action potential, Dörre insists on tendencies of fragmentation as produced by rising competition within the labour class, as well as by individuals' 'exhaustion' (Sennett) which results from continuous exposure to precarisation. In his analysis, such fragmentation and exhaustion produces a "post-democratic tendency" (Crouch 2008:71): a growing difficulty to perceive oneself as part of a clearly defined group (Dörre 2009).

Coming to a critical evaluation of the presented studies, all of them, in principle, understand employees' agency and sense constructions as resulting from a confrontation with given work and social living conditions. Yet, especially Fullin's argument tends towards understanding these issues from an individualising, psychological perspective. In her account, it is individuals' employment orientations and especially their transition expectations and simultaneously lacking projecting capacities that seem to be the final cause for employees' limited action potential while facing limited prospects of employment stabilisation. More precisely, she interprets lacking projecting capacities as indicating a contradiction between employees' consciousness of needing to develop new, proactive labour market attitudes, and their effective behaviour, dominated by their orientations towards permanent full-time employment and respective transition expectations. Consequently, the need for individual's (professional) empowerment is stressed as a solution, as that should produce better prospects for professional development for every employee.

However, this proposal is problematic and limited. In the form presented here, employees' coping practices produce only limited action potential and, hence, empowerment in the sense of increasing these capacities is surely necessary. Yet, similar to the arguments by Pongratz and Voss, Fullin seems to reduce this to a call for better capacities of adaptation to given flexible labour market conditions. Subjects' agency margins appear as a constraint to such adaptation, but do not entail any claims for appropriating increased margins of their own disposal over work and living conditions, increased conflict capacities, and power resources for struggling over these conditions and the shape of contemporary society. Her argument for

professional empowerment entails the risk of reproducing the neoliberal imperative of individual self-responsibility (for labour market success or failure). She equally calls for social labour regulations and welfare institutions as decisive factors to reduce precariousness, but without naming the social struggles, the concrete agency and actors necessary to achieve these, and without a clear criticism of supposed economic necessities (such as flexibility) as the given frame and limits of possible re-regulations. That is, the scope of claimed social change in Fullin's proposal remains limited and social change itself is projected in a passive way from above (through the state).

It should be stated more clearly that the analysed work and employment orientations can always only be considered as one side in the dialectic relationship between agency and structure. In fact, structural constraints, like employees' existential dependence on wage incomes, remain under evaluated in Fullin's final conclusions. The quantitative surveys and Dörre's concept of discriminating precariousness are more explicit on this point, clearly naming employment instability, resulting low and insecure incomes, as well as restricted professional development prospects, as systemic and structurally produced risks of precarious employment positions. However, the surveys also call for a shift in focus in employees' work experiences from problems and conflicts concerning employment conditions and work organisation towards questions of professional development as a source of satisfaction and recognition, and thus, as a central resource for coping. Consequently, they could be said to sustain the claim for individuals' professional empowerment as the main strategy against precarisation. Yet, instead of any such either-or alternative, employees' meaning constructions have to be critically analysed and the concept of empowerment questioned with regard to its ideological and selective character: First, professional empowerment only concerns a minority of highly qualified workers. Second, even among this group, its effects would remain limited due to existing labour market conditions, including employers' rationalisation strategies, resulting limited workforce demand (for high-end jobs and contracts), precarious employment conditions, and increasing labour market competition.

More clearly than Fullin, Murgia interprets employees' orientations towards permanent employment and their respective transition expectations as effective coping practices - and not (mainly) as an individual limit and cause for being blocked in a trap of precariousness. She analyses them as employees' productive strategies to narrate themselves and as generating concrete, current action potential. In contrast to Fullin, orientations towards stabilisation and transition appear as enabling employees to maintain their capacities of self-narration and to face current experiences of precarisation. This is not to say that there would be no trap of

precarisation at all, no risk of self-damaging, limiting orientations, lacking narrative, and projecting capacities. But, this is only one side of the coin. In fact, both positions are correct and together point to the complex and diversified functioning of transition expectations as coping practices: As argued by Fullin, subjects learn to deal with experiences of precarisation and dissatisfying employment positions by displaying non-identification with this current position (but, not necessarily with their current profession). In this way, as pointed out by Dörre, they practice forms of secondary integration. Such secondary integration can effectively produce a trap of precariousness in the sense of limiting employees' action potential to an adaptation and resignation to their precarious status (such as for Dörre's "discriminated precarious"). But, it does not necessarily produce a loss of narrative capacities. Instead, subjects' performances of secondary integration can also be interpreted as practices to maintain narrative capacities. This double effect (of re-establishing narrative capacities, and thus, producing and at the same time limiting concrete action potential) is a hint about the dialectic nature of coping practices as comprising both elements of adaptation and appropriation, as exceeding passive submission, including self-enacting integration, self-constitution, and self-willed action potential.

However, all in all, also Murgia's analysis largely remains on the level of existing individual practices without clearly developing a perspective of enlarged action potential as both subjective and social, political requirements. This limit is linked to the biographical research interest and method, as these focus attention on individual narratives rather than on social agency and change. Yet, also in case of biographical narrations, analysis could observe more closely their inherent breaks, contradictions, and struggles, and could take a more critical stance towards the described practices of self-representation, identity construction, and inscription into society.

As indicated, Armano's work stresses a subject's ability (and need) to create and maintain positive self-representations. This importance is explicitly formulated not only with respect to the mental level of recognition, but as an active achievement with practical effects on the employment situation and as producing material action potential: particularly capacities of networking as a basis for future access to new employment positions. That is, the analysis goes beyond assessing long-term orientations towards stable employment and renders visible employees' current concrete, material practices of dealing with precarious positions and the required self-marketisation. Consequently, Armano shows even more clearly that an individual's strong perceptions of self-realisation do not only constitute an adaptive, compensatory mental orientation towards the present, but also a capacity and practice of

appropriation to make a precarious situation more liveable. Yet, also in this case (resulting) contradictions and conflicts, be they within employees' meaning constructions or their concrete (collective) practices, are not further explored. For example, experiencing a constant need to maintain and invest in informal networks as a source of precarisation versus the support obtained from these informal networks for the transition from one job to the next. What is lacking is an analysis of the scope and limits of acquired action potentials and a perspective of their enlargement. To overcome these limits, as argued in chapter two, I propose to proceed in two steps: First, explicitly exploring the relevant fields of conflict within employees' daily work experiences; second, and only on this basis, analysing the respective coping practices and action potential.

In Dörre's case, the level of criticism is a different one. The problem with his categories is that they tend to reproduce the division line between highly qualified, flexible employment and low qualified, precarious employment, ascribing different, expressive or instrumental work attitudes to both groups. According to Dörre, discriminated precarious employees practice a modus of integration oriented towards reproduction and instrumental workforce interests (wages, stable subsistence), whereas self-managers achieve integration by means of subjectivity-related interests in the self-realisation and work contents. Both modes are interpreted not as in equal coexistence, but as hierarchically located: "subjective integration gains relevance only if income and employment security are considered as given" (Dörre 2009: 47; translation K.C.). This hierarchical distinction recalls the previously criticised positioning of qualitative and quantitative labour process and existence related experiences of precarisation within different zones of integration-disintegration.

As argued above, I propose to oppose such a dualist vision with the thesis of generalised experiences of precarisation and self-regulation. Not only claims for one's own professionalism, interests in good work and recognition, but also the 'art of waiting' would have to prove relevant for employees' practices of coping and secondary integration also among low qualified employees in a position of permanent discriminating precarity. The other way round, existential experiences of precarisation, as well as reactions in the form of continuous frustration, shame, anger, and resignation are also supposed to occur for highly qualified, creative workers, without necessarily reducing the relevance of work for identity formation. Therefore, my empirical analysis will not proceed by distinguishing distinct employee types, but instead emphasise different forms of coping: allowing for multiple positionings of employees within different coping patterns and using different patterns of coping practices at the same time.

### 3.4.2 Subject-oriented research on the labour process

This section deals with subject-oriented research at the level of the labour process. It refers to literature on employees' work attitudes and practices. Regarding work attitudes, the first studies to be considered are examples from management studies and labour psychology. They look at work attitudes from the perspective of management 'empowerment'<sup>59</sup> strategies and analyse the latter's effects on employee commitment and satisfaction (Saba et al 2006; Hall/Atkinson 2006). Second, reference is made to German literature dealing with the development of employee orientations in the face of subjectification and changing performance requirements. This comprises Pongratz and Voß's empirical assessment of the entreployee thesis (Pongratz/Voß 2003), Menz's inquiry into individual performance orientations (Menz 2009), and Mattuscheck et al's as well as Artus' empirical research on 'subjectified Taylorism' and 'repressive integration' (Matuschek et al 2008; Artus' 2008, 2008a). Moreover, a French study on work attitudes by Dubet et al (2006) is included in this section. Finally, adding the practical level of concrete workplace agency, the discussion turns to recent labour process debate, particularly the debate on emotional labour (Hochschild 1983; Ezzy 2001; Bolton/Boyd 2003; Korczynski 2003; Llyod/Payne 2008) and one example of workplace-related Italian ethnographic research (Pentimalli 2009).

To give a brief overview, these studies all insist on the importance of employees' lacking real opportunities for participation, autonomy, and control within the labour process (especially concerning service interactions and employees' service-related values and knowledge). This combines with an equally lacking recognition of self-responsible performances. The violation of moral justice expectations, thus, appears as central conflict experience in the face of subjectified labour control. These experiences form a sharp contrast to simultaneously suffered high performance and flexibility requirements, stress levels, and lacking existential security (particularly expressed in a continuous orientation towards permanent full-time employment with full social rights and protections).

Regarding coping practices, moral concepts of a 'decent good life' and of the labour relation as a 'give and take' appear as central for employees' meaning construction in the face of these (latent) conflicts. While concepts of 'give and take' might sustain violated psychological contracts, individual orientations towards the 'good life' foster practices of border drawing and withdrawal from work. A further important practice of border drawing is 'surface acting'. The latter is enacted particularly in the face of emotional labour requirements in service

---

<sup>59</sup> In management studies, what is referred to here as indirect forms of labour control is most often phrased as employee 'empowerment'. The term refers to the same participatory and normative management strategies described above.



interactions. Various practices of transferring conflicts can be detected, namely the personalisation and externalisation of conflict reasons (by ascribing them to individuals' character and capacities or to supposedly natural market forces). Finally, practices of appropriation prove important and this time are extensively considered within the studies at hand. They take the form of reinterpreting perceived work conditions, insisting in one's own service values through practices of 'face saving', creating moral support and pressure release through collective humour and sabotage. However, such collective capacities appear again as weakened by simultaneous processes and experiences of dissociation and individualisation.

Turning to the management studies of workforce empowerment and commitment, it has to be stated that current research is mostly of a quantitative nature. These studies generally concentrate on revealing the causal factors that influence employees' satisfaction, their commitment to work, and related aspects assumed to reflect the success or failure of participatory management strategies (such as identification with the firm or intentions to quit a job). Thus, the respective research can show that changes in management strategies regarding the work organisation or the employment structure are only one among a bundle of variables influencing employees' attitudes towards their work and the firm. A more or less flexible or precarious employment status, or more or less initiatives of workforce empowerment, alone cannot account for the degree of satisfaction and commitment expressed by employees. Instead, an employee's profile (age, gender, education, etc.), their position on the labour market, as well as their perceptions of the labour relation and the state of their psychological contract<sup>60</sup> emerge as central factors shaping work attitudes (Saba et al 2006).

The insights such quantitative analyses can offer for the research question posed here concerning employees' coping strategies remain limited as they focus more on the success of management strategies and not on employees' acting capacities. Searching for causal, artificially isolated variables that explain work attitudes makes it difficult to grasp subjects' coping practices in their complexity: as confrontations with their work and living conditions and as processes of constructing meaning in which all these variables are connected.

There is still limited qualitative research focussing on employee satisfaction and commitment that takes into account the combined effects of different forms of flexibilisation and changing

---

<sup>60</sup> The term 'psychological contract' refers to the expectations employees have with respect to the employment relation: Their ideas of how the employer should behave towards them and what they can legitimately expect in return for their work performance. The basic argument behind this concept is that – beyond the respect of the formal employment contract – the degree to which, in employees' eyes, an employer lives up to their expectations in the job influences their commitment to work (Anderson and Schalk 1998; Rousseau and Tijoriwala 1998; Rousseau 2000).

labour control. A study by Hall and Atkins (2006), which should be mentioned here for its interesting insights into employees' meaning constructions, is focussed exclusively on flexibilisation of work times. It seeks to determine the relation between management strategies of flexibilisation and employees' perceptions of such measures, in order to assess their effects on work attitudes in terms of commitment, responsibility, and self-regulation. Going beyond the quantitative studies that largely take work attitudes as a given, here employees' constructions of meaning, and thus, their subjectivity, are seen as crucial for the formation of work attitudes. The central meaning constructions determined were employees' concepts of control and their ideas of the employment relation.

Regarding the first issue, Hall and Atkins differentiate between an internal and an external locus of control. They refer to an individual's perception of where control over his/her life is located: life as governed by one's own decisions (internal locus) versus its determination by outer forces and conditions (external locus). An internal locus of control, they conclude, fosters positive attitudes especially towards informal forms of flexibility. In contrast, perceptions of formal flexibility (in their case the forms of work time flexibility officially offered by management and/or established in collective contracts) as being beyond one's own reach and influence impedes the use of and positive attitudes towards these options. What is of interest here is that it is not so much the given opportunities of control and influence, but rather employees' perceptions of control that determine their positive assessment of informal flexibility. In the considered case, the informal regulation of work times appears as only a little permissive if measured by its outcomes in terms of employees' influence on final work time schedules. Nevertheless, employees' evaluate this regulation and flexibility itself positively as it (at least in principle) allows for (an illusion of) self-determination and participation. Translating this into the perspective of the research question being considered here, employees' constructions of meaning and their concepts of control effectively appear as means for cognitive coping with the (given) requirements of flexibilisation.

Regarding employees' perceptions of the employment relation, Hall and Atkinson note a diffused adherence to a concept of "give and take", which fosters a perception of informal flexibility as a fair exchange between employee and employer needs. Consequently, contrasts between this mental reference frame and real experiences are attributed by employees not to possibly conflicting interests but to personal capacities of managers. While revealing these strategies to construct meanings and their effect on work attitudes, the authors do not engage in any critical consideration of such universalist perceptions of employment relations and work time flexibility as win-win situations. Their account loses analytical strength as it lacks

an assessment of power relations and conflicts within the work process. As a result, they can not grasp either the contradictory processes through which flexibility requirements are internalised, nor the related dynamics of labour control. Linked to this is a further point of critique: As Hall's and Atkinson's argument on employees' locus of control does not address the social influence and social constructiveness of such meaning constructions, it tends to omit the influence of hegemonic social as well as managerial discourses about self-responsibility and self-regulation on employees' perceptions of flexibility. In spite of their concept of a continuum of different control loci (between which individuals can shift over time according to their position within differing control contexts), perceptions of control risk appear as a trait of the individual character rather than as an outcome of a subject's active confrontation with social reality - as also criticised above with regard to Fullin's work.

The main interest of the following studies no longer lies in the success or failure of management strategies, but directly on their effects on employees' subjectivities, self-perceptions, and self-positionings. Studies of work attitudes and subjectivities were prominent in the German debate about workers' consciousness during the 1970s. In the 1980s, this line of research was largely abandoned. In the following, labour studies and subject-oriented analysis developed into rather separate strands, with the latter concentrating on the lifeworld instead of the workplace. However, the original Consciousness studies of the 1970s also provided only limited analysis of concrete work practices. Investigations were confined to the level of employee orientations and consciousness, which they set in relation to economic and social structures of class society. More precisely, they analysed the connections between collective interest orientations, on the one hand, and social structures, work organisation, and collective work experiences on the shop floor, on the other. Most of this research is of a qualitative nature (Peter 1984; Menz 2009).

Only since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has labour sociology in Germany turned once again towards an analysis of labour subjectivities with the debate on a Post-Fordist subjectification of labour. Empirical inquiry now focuses on the development of self-entrepreneur attitudes as indicating a new type of labour subjectivity. Most prominently, in their 2003 empirical investigation of a wide range of different employee types, Pongratz and Voß note a (still) profound incoherence between requirements of self-regulation and employees' respective orientations (Pongratz/Voß 2003).<sup>61</sup> Moreover, there appears to exist an incoherence between the different levels of work orientations: While endogenous

---

<sup>61</sup> Their sample included employees from different sectors and work contexts marked with different degrees of flexibilisation as well as with different qualification levels.

expressive interests and related aspirations in self-control and autonomy in their work are strongly pronounced across different employee groups, this is much less the case for employees' interest and willingness to engage in self-marketing at the labour market or in the flexibilisation of boundaries between work and life.<sup>62</sup> Instead of developing sound, coherent 'entreployee attitudes', endogenous expressive interests and especially what Pongratz and Voß call 'performance orientation' (the orientation towards maximising one's own performance at work and the desire to do a good job) coexist with a strong interest in limiting flexibility and insecurity, especially with regard to one's own labour market position, life course, and daily reproduction.

With regard to the limited positive orientations towards marketing the self and employment flexibility found in their sample, Pongratz and Voß delineate a further contradiction. There appears to exist a tension between use-value and exchange-value orientations not only with regard to security interests, but also due to the contrasting implications that self-regulation has on both levels: While a strong use-value orientation often comprises a positive evaluation of cooperation among colleagues, embracing flexibilisation, self-responsibility, and the consequent individualisation of labour relations entails growing competition.

Interestingly, the authors note that, in contrast to positive references about cooperation, strong intrinsic expressive interests in work are articulated by employees only as individual and not as collective or political issues. This points to the ambiguous effects of individualised labour relations at the work place. In fact, it would be insufficient to attribute tensions between cooperation and competition only to different logics of different spheres of self-regulation in the work place and the labour market. The subjectification of labour control and the introduction of flexible forms of employment can be expected to create pressures towards competitive relations also within the work place. Therefore, employees' interest in self-realisation, including aspirations of self-regulation and cooperation, can be expected to clash with requirements produced by these management strategies already within the work organisation, and not only outside of the company, in terms of interests related to the external labour market or the lifeworld.

Rather than exploring these lines of conflict and employee coping practices further, Pongratz and Voß offer an explanation for the seeming lack of coherence between autonomy and security interests, which (more explicitly than in Fullin's case) is focussed on an assumed

---

<sup>62</sup> On the level of life-value-orientations about 50% of the interviewees engage in a "sliding segmentation" of work and life: They are ready to except blurring boundaries, but deviations from the Fordist standard work day need to be negotiated. Another 30% practise a "strategy of integration" in which a general readiness for blurring boundaries meets with interests in setting limits to flexibilisation equally oriented at the Fordist standard work day (Pongratz/Voß 2003: 113ff, 138).

mentality problem. In their account, (some) employees seem to cut themselves off from alleged opportunities and power positions that could enhance their self-marketing, since they remain stuck in old cultural patterns of Fordist standard employment. While value change processes would foster individuals' orientations towards self-realisation (as taken up by management strategies), their readiness to equally assume the risks entailed in greater self-responsibility would lack behind (153ff).<sup>63</sup> In this way, employees' limited orientation especially towards labour market flexibility and self-marketing risks being viewed merely as a deviation from the 'entremployee' ideal, which is taken as an (objective) requirement of Post-Fordist labour.<sup>64</sup> On this point, the argument by Pongratz and Voß can easily be connected with a management rhetoric of flexibilisation and integrated in the neoliberal discourses of self-responsibility (which is criticised by the authors themselves as ideological as it does not take into account the unequal distribution of real opportunities (151)). Problematic in this is, above all, that it passes unacknowledged.<sup>65</sup> In addition, this criticism relates to the methodological problem of ideal type constructions that risk losing sight of contradictions and conflicts as well as social power relations.

In sum, what is lacking also in this case is an explicit analysis of subject practices as coping practices in the face of social requirements of acting and thinking. From this perspective, empirically detected conflicts and contradictions within employees' practices and common sense would have to be acknowledged as a reaction against and reflecting on these social context conditions, not merely as lacking adaptation. However, despite the mentioned analytical limits, the 'incoherencies' detected by Pongratz and Voß are of central interest for a conflict and contradiction-oriented approach. They suggest probable contradictions and fields of conflict employees have to face with their coping practices. These include tensions between self-regulation and security interests, as well as the ambiguous character of expressive, work task, and use-value oriented interests as cooperation-fostering but not collectively articulated interest. These tensions reflect the basic contradiction between

---

<sup>63</sup> The fault for this, however, is not only given to employees, but also to the work and social contexts. Management's own reluctance towards employee empowerment and a lack of engagement in work time and employment flexibility creates insufficient stimuli or opportunities for capacity building in self-regulation. Thus, limited opportunities to realise a successful self-regulation make social discourses on self-responsibility become ideological (146-151).

<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Menz criticises that the empirical entremployee studies seem to merely serve the function of testing the entremployee thesis and to confirm a more or less successful adaptation of workers' subjectivity to the new requirements (Menz 2009: 59ff).

<sup>65</sup> Remembering Gramsci's definition of power as hegemony based on a combination of enforcement and consent, having arguments in common with hegemonic discourses appears as a rather unsurprising effect of the integrative strength that constitutes power as hegemony. Such intersections need to be acknowledged in academic discourse, not only from a critical perspective, but also with regard to an understanding of science as 'objective' in the sense of keeping a distance from political ideologies.

autonomy and precarisation inherent in the current processes of flexibilisation, subjectification, and individualisation of labour relations, and more specifically in the ambiguous requirements of constant, precarising, and neoliberally framed (but nonetheless also potentially autonomy-enhancing) self-activation at all three levels of the labour process, the labour market, and the work-life-balance.<sup>66</sup>

A recent study to be considered here about the empirical connection between Post-Fordist, subjectifying management strategies, and employee orientations is Menz's work on performance orientations in the car and electronic industries (Menz 2009). He analyses the ways employees legitimise and motivate their labour practices and work performances. In contrast to the empirical testing of the entremployee thesis by Pongratz and Voss, the focus shifts from dynamics of subjectification and consequent requirements of self-regulation (as central changes in current regimes of labour control, work organisation, and labour requirements) to transformations in the patterns of legitimation of such labour control and requirements. In this, work attitudes and performances are explicitly situated in the context of labour control and workplace power. What is considered is how, through these employee orientations, workplace consent and workforce alignment are realised, without questioning to which degree employees' attitudes respect a supposedly new type of labour subjectivity, or taken for granted objective requirements of subjectified labour.

On this level of labour control, Menz believes that a shift in the dominant regime of legitimation has occurred, reflecting the subjectification, and organisational and economic decentralisation of labour processes: Fordist concepts of performance justice are being replaced by a Post-Fordist market oriented regime of legitimation. In the former case, legitimacy of labour requirements results from their perception as a fair exchange between performance and compensation - and thus as respecting justice expectations of a fair balance between labour efforts and wage. Under Post-Fordism, in contrast, legitimacy is produced by reference to economic necessities generated by external, inaccessible market forces. What

---

<sup>66</sup> Aside from the empirical research directly linked to the entremployee thesis, Foucault-inspired studies on governmentality address the formation of a new self-entrepreneurial labour subjectivity within a decentralised work organisation (for example Bröckling 2000, 2007; Rose 1999, 2000). The empirical approach here is limited to a discourse analysis of respective management literature and the therein formulated subject requirements. It does not investigate actual subject practices. As Menz points out, governmentality studies do not explore the actual realisation of these management theories and guidelines in concrete work contexts. They miss a material term for and understanding of the subject, as has been criticised more generally with regard Foucauldian theory of power above. Consequently, they risk simply reproducing the control claims and ideological calls of management literature, to identify self-control and management control, and to lack capacities for critique and formulating a collective perspective of appropriation (Menz 2009: 108ff).

counts as appropriate pay is no longer the standardised, measurable labour effort (regulated by collective norms), but (individual) market success as conditioned by relations of competition. At the same time, overall performance requirements are increased and individualised. Instead of standardised and limited labour performances, employees are expected to continuously produce an additional individual surplus value, based on a self-responsible, creative, and distinguishable realisation of labour power. As such, Post-Fordist performance requirements are radicalised in a double sense: Labour performances are required not only without any regulated limits, but also without any guaranties concerning their compensation. In other words, labour performances get dissociated from both the necessary measurable effort and their recompense.

Regarding employees' performance orientations, Menz argues that, as a result of this shift in patterns of legitimation, Fordist norms of performance justice are partially eroding. While still important as disciplinary tools, they are losing power as resources of resistance against performance requirements. The consequence is having only 'partial legitimation': The Post-Fordist market regime lacks a moral foundation and substitutes for this with its rational argument of economic necessity.

On first glance, this position is in contrast with the importance of the 'give and take' concept ascertained by Hall and Atkinson (with respect to employees' attitudes towards work time flexibility). Also the last study presented here points to a continuous relevance of moral concepts within employees' common sense in the face of the Post-Fordist market regime. This point still requires further investigation. Moreover, an open question remains regarding how employees cope with this 'partial legitimation', its lacking moral basis, the pressures resulting from radicalised performance requirements, and arguments of economic necessities. As resistance to the given performance requirements appears limited, contradictions that can be assumed to arise from this combination must find some other way of being processed in employees' common sense notions and their concrete labour practices.

Staying on the level of work attitudes (and not regarding concrete labour practices), the following study by Dubet and his colleagues gives one possible answer to this question. Interestingly, this French research group insists on the importance of moral justice concepts for current work attitudes, although in terms of a mental withdrawal from work and regarding orientations in and towards the private life (Dubet 2006). In an impressive empirical study based on 350 partly standardised interviews and 1,150 questionnaires covering employees from various sectors, different professions, employment status, and age groups, the findings indicate that moral concepts of a decent, good life are tools to oppose experienced constraints

at the work place and to defend personal identity and dignity. In this analysis, the contradictory relationship between experienced disrespect of labour performance by management, and employees' own high valorisation of these same work and labour performance leads to a privatising withdrawal: Employees come to focus on themselves, their personal life, and its moral integrity.

In Dubet et al's analysis, such a self-centred focus based on moral concepts of the good life goes hand in hand with a dissociation of individual experiences. On the one hand, individual experiences (of injustice) become more and more fragmented and pluralised. On the other hand, an employee's notion of justice and his/her interpretations of the experienced situations get dissociated, fragmented, and incoherent. Individual, fragmented aspects of overall experiences are used by subjects in a selective way to legitimise their own agency within different, dissociated situations. This internally contradictory character of justice expectations and injustice experiences produces a threat of constant 'restlessness'. Or, it results in a process of destabilisation and precarisation.<sup>67</sup> On this backdrop, according to Dubet et al, any reference to global concepts of society or a workers' collective and to collective enemies necessarily erodes. This supposedly necessary dissolution of collective frames of orientation and agency is interpreted, in an itself individualising perspective, as a consequence of the incoherent, fragmented and pluralising character of individual experiences and justice concepts.

Despite its dense and detailed insight in actual work attitudes, this study is limited because it misses any recognition of such self-focussing and dissociation as coping practices. As strongly criticised by Peter, Dubet et al uncritically take subjective experiences and meaning constructions as objective realities, without locating them sufficiently within their social context (Peter 2009). As such, attitudes and worldviews of individuals appear as final reasons for the observed processes of individualisation and dissociation - and not, as for example in Dörre's analysis of such fragmentation, the precarising conditions of work and existence. This leads not only to an unacknowledged loss, but to an explicit dismissal of any perspective of collective agency.

Having presented research on work attitudes and performance orientations, the next author shifts the discussion towards employees' conflict experiences, their individual and collective power positions within the labour process, and the resulting conditions and prospects of collective interest organisation. In Artus' work, the specific characteristics of current labour

---

<sup>67</sup> Note the similarity between the idea of 'restlessness' and Dörre's previously introduced formulation of a 'continuous suspension' producing a permanent need for self-activation (Dörre 2009).



control regimes and the establishment of workplace consent remain central, but the focus here is no longer only on subjectification (as for Pongratz and Voss), or on marketisation (as for Menz), but instead on the connection between repressive and integrative management strategies. Such “repressive integration” is determined by Artus as being typical for repetitive, low paid, and precarious service labour. The central effects of such repressive integration are pronounced experiences of precarisation, both in terms of individual as well as collective vulnerability. Requirements of self-regulation and intensified performance pressures, in turn, appear as less relevant fields of conflict.

As employees’ reactions towards this control regime of repressive integration are concerned, Artus interprets the encountered apparent high degree of workplace consent and absence of open conflicts as a “pragmatic survival reflex”. As a coping practice, employees consent to management’s requests for flexibility, self-regulation, and participation reflects both their “practical sense” (Bourdieu 1987) of the strongly asymmetrical power positions at their work places,<sup>68</sup> and their own intrinsic interests in symbolic recognition enforced by experiences of precarisation. However, the result is not voluntary, enthusiastic self-exploitation, but rather a retreat from certain material interests, such as higher wages or better work conditions, as these are perceived as utopian. Simultaneously, one’s own work conditions are rendered more acceptable by similar practices of comparison as already pointed out in Fullin’s study on precarious employees’ job orientations. Here, a comparison is made with others in worse situations. The degree of workforce alignment and integration within this overall picture depends on employees’ social and professional background and ambitions, and reflects the differentiated forms of participation offered by management. It is higher for the permanent core workforce, particularly where some professional growth and small upward steps in the firm hierarchy are possible, and lower for the peripheral, precarious staff.

Addressing the issue of collective agency, Artus highlights typical problems of collective organising in precarious service labour. On an individual level, employees feel high levels of vulnerability, while lacking experience in successful collective struggles and offensive conflict strategies. Such weak individual power positions are a direct result of a mix of precarious labour market positions, high performance pressures in the daily work, repressive management strategies, and particularly the strong anti-union measures. Together with the described mechanisms of forced integration and corporate identity formation, these repressive management strategies turn any attempts of collective organising into a ‘swim against the

---

<sup>68</sup> It should be remembered from Artus’ analysis of repressive integration that this includes not only a forced individual integration resulting from precarious work and employment conditions, but also strong anti-union pressures and evasion strategies practiced by management (see section 3.3.2).

stream'. Collective power positions are further weakened by the extreme workforce fragmentation caused by flexibilised work processes, a heterogeneous workforce composition (with actual interest differences and diverging value orientations), and the competition and conflicts among colleagues enhanced by constant performance pressures. Additionally, an emphatic corporate culture fosters a merger of workplace relations and personal friendships, particularly in interactions with superiors. Besides offering intrinsic benefits of symbolic recognition, Artus indicates this merger as one of the central reasons for employees' consent to participatory, responsabilising management strategies.

Finally, Artus sees employees' moral orientations towards justice, respect, and dignity as setting an important limit and possibly a breakpoint for management's strategies of repressive integration. Similar to the insistence in the before mentioned studies on recognition being the central field of conflict, in Artus' interpretation, the daily experience of precarious work and employment conditions renders normative control fragile as it violates these aspirations. Yet, in contrast to Dubet, such moral orientations are not seen as an expression of a privatising withdrawal from work, but as a possible field of conflict within the labour process. The conditions required for this conflict to emerge, though, are considered difficult, and all the more so on a collective level, given the effective pressures of repressive integration and partial incorporation. Artus' argument helps to bring precarisation and work conditions to the fore as central fields of conflict, and as an important background for the conflictive experience of (symbolic) recognition and participation: It is employees' violated moral aspirations that might produce a breaking point for the management's strategies. But, the reasons behind this violation are interrelated and comprise both precarious work conditions and the limited, forced forms of participation. While forcefully naming employees' consent and the lacking open conflict as a "pragmatic survival reflex", and thus, as the result of a coping process with encountered work conditions, her work still does not offer a more extensive analysis of employees' concrete, practical, and cognitive individual daily coping practices.

As indicated above, there is an interesting study by Matuschek et al, which offers a similar analysis of control regimes in low qualified and precarious service labour. They coined the term "subjectified Taylorism" for this control regime. Their study puts employees' conflict experiences into the centre of empirical analysis. Instead of Artus' focus on the conditions of collective agency and interest representation, it offers more insight into individual concrete daily labour practices and common sense of employees in coping with work related conflicts

and contradictions. Their investigation deals with call centre labour. They describe employees' aspirations in self-regulation and work contents as highly conflictive and challenging in terms of management's participatory control strategies. Beyond the violation of moral justice aspirations focussed by the other studies, they insist on employees' practices in appropriating and enlarging the offered autonomy margins, and in their claims for their own professional expertise as a central strategy for assuring personal integrity and dignity in the interaction with customers (Matuschek 2008). The issues of self-regulation, work contents, one's own control, and competences in the service interaction are also central to the labour process debate, which is presented next.

In contrast to most of the research presented so far in this section (aside from this latter work by Matuschek et al), empirical contributions to the current labour process debate particularly emphasise employees' concrete agency in front of management control - and not 'only' their cognitive orientations. The analysis here equally is interested in power relations at the workplace and employees' conflict experiences within the labour process. More precisely, it aims at investigating the production of hegemony through both labour control and a subject's own practices. In this, special attention is given to collective action potential. Unlike Artus' focus on institutional interest representation and collective organisation, particular attention is paid to daily shop floor solidarity. The following overview concentrates on the emotional labour debate, which is concerned with the conflictive character of emotions in frontline service labour.

The emotional labour debate starts from the contradictory mix of direct and indirect control encountered in frontline services. As will be argued below also for the development of retail labour processes, this mix is necessary due to the direct interaction between employees and customers which has to be controlled, as well as the double management strategies of cost reduction and service quality enhancement.<sup>69</sup> Direct customer contact is seen here as adding an additional level of social relations to workplace interactions, which can have considerable influence on employees' labour practices, experiences, and motivations.

These interactions with customers, in fact, directly involve employees' personality. Consequently, the management of feelings, emotions, appearances, and bodies becomes an object of labour control, as well as an aspect of labour requirements, which employees have to

---

<sup>69</sup> The focus of Artus' analysis of 'repressive integration' is a slightly different one. The mix of direct and indirect control is not primarily seen as a result of the specific service character of labour processes, but as a functional form of control in a context of precarious labour. That is, participatory and normative mechanisms aim to smooth possibly disruptive experiences of enforced precarisation, repression, and exploitation.

face. In comparison to the German studies on subjectification and employee orientations analysis here does not concentrate on the effects of subjectifying, market oriented, and/or repressively integrating management strategies, but rather on the specific emotional and aesthetic aspects of frontline service labour. In this, emotional labour is understood as the management of feelings aimed at creating a publicly observable attitude and a respective facial and bodily display (Hochschild 1987:3). Aesthetic labour, in turn, refers to the organisational mobilisation of embodied capacities and attributes that are supposed to favourably appeal to customers and, hence, guide workforce selection (Warhurst/Nickson 104, 116). Both of these kinds of labour overlap with the body as a mirror and manifestation of enacted and embodied feelings.

Regarding the analysis of management's control over such emotional and aesthetic labour, the emotional labour debate is marked by the same dualisms as the rest of labour process studies. Neo-Taylorist management strategies of direct supervision, rationalisation, and cost reduction are opposed to service quality and normative, indirect control. In terms of employees' practices, the debate is polarised along the lines of alienation versus resistance. Either emotional labour is seen as an increased source of alienation or as a new avenue for employee resistance and autonomous agency.

In her famous study on flight attendants, Hochschild analyses in detail the alienating effects of emotional (self-)control imposed by customer oriented management strategies (Hochschild 1983). In a similar way and looking more generally at corporate culture across different sectors, Ezzy (2001) points to the intensification of work as the dominant underlying logic of cultural, participatory control strategies. In contrast, Bolton and Boyd reclaim frontline employees', and in particular flight attendants', own active and self-willed agency in managing their emotions, especially during conflicts with customers (Bolton and Boyd 2003). In a similar vein, Korczynski's study on call centre labour argues that the contradictory character of management strategies limits the latter's effective grip on employees' subjectivity and instead opens up a new space for employee resistance (Korczynski 2000, 2003).

Looking at these researches in some more detail, Hochschild points to the fact that the self-management of emotion, just like physical labour, requires conscious effort and hard work. Alienation, in this, is produced by the fact that emotional management skills have become a sellable commodity, and feelings are getting commercialised. Employees confront such requirements for commercialisation by restricting themselves to 'surface acting'. In contrast to 'deep acting', this consists of displaying pretended emotions. 'Surface acting' is seen by

Hochschild as the ultimate alienation from one's true self, as expressed in 'deep acting'. Given this focus on alienation, her work can be criticised for underestimating employees' practices of resistance. Though, their active stance in the management and exploitation of emotions is recognised in the distinction between "emotion work" and "emotional labour". The first refers to employees' own emotional self-management, while the second indicates managements' attempts to structure and control the way emotions are expressed.

According to Ezzy (2001), the intensification of labour requirements results from the imperative of maximising productivity to which corporate cultures necessarily adhere. He concludes that management's cultural and normative strategies, as based on a manipulation of workplace culture and subjectivity and embedded in a Neo-Taylorist work organisation, would result in a "simulacrum of trust" and a colonisation of the self. Such a simulacrum of trust is expressed by a high degree of firm loyalty and a strong belief in a company's reciprocity and its team rhetoric, despite contrary everyday experiences (635ff). The colonisation of the self, according to Ezzy, results in a reduction of the self to work and a weakened importance of all other life activities. It goes hand in hand with considerable peer group pressures to conform to given labour requirements, a sibling rivalry among colleagues to obtain individual performance rewards, and a system of nepotist patronage. This pressure, rivalry, and nepotism produces conformist employee behaviour, an absence of any resistance practices, and above all, an aggressive individualism. This is seen as a systematic product of engineered corporate cultures and respective normative control.

More than in Hochschild's case, this argument constitutes a totalitarian vision of management's control (capacities). From this perspective, all that is left for employees are individualised, subordinate tactics. While the alleged absolute individualisation is presented in more aggressive terms, insisting in growing competition rather than in a loss of collective capacities, the vanishing of any collective perspective is the same as for Dubet.

In Bolton and Boyd's terms, employees manage their emotions in a self-willed way by applying divers feeling rules.<sup>70</sup> In this, management induced pecuniary and commercially motivated feeling rules differ from and might be opposed by employees' own social and professional values. These contradictions and conflicts between different feeling rules, according to Bolton and Boyd, create a space for self-determination that appears as a direct result of the special emotional character of frontline service labour. In contrast to

---

<sup>70</sup> The term feeling rules describes the various sets of social norms that individuals refer to in order to manage their emotional performances in an organizational context.

Hochschild's characterisation of 'surface acting' and 'empty' emotional performances, they view this as a possible form of resistance against management's feeling rules and a way to limit one's own labour performances. In other words, employees refrain from 'deep acting', because they are aware of restraints set to their emotion work. Such restraints result from difficult customers, as well as management's strategies of cost reduction, which undermine service and work conditions. Due to these restraints, pecuniary management induced and prescriptive, professionally motivated emotional management enter in direct conflict with each other, as professional norms contradict requirements of cost reduction. For example, placating abusive customers might be seen by employees as contrary to professional rules, and thus, might be rejected or provoke emotional withdrawal.

However, 'deep acting' comes back to play an important role for resistance practices in what Bolton and Boyd's call 'unmanaged space'. These are situations where prescriptive organisational rules do not apply, for example because managers and superiors are absent in the aircraft cabin during a flight. In such instances, employees' emotion work might more easily follow their own professional and philanthropic feeling rules. Bolton and Boyd find that coping with emotional requirements in such instances is based on social rules of solidarity. Conflicts with customers are faced by collective workplace humour, camaraderie, and mutual support among colleagues. Whereas in embarrassing situations for customers (such as an illness during the flight), employees practice strategies of 'face-saving' out of empathy for customers.

In sum, in contrast to Hochschild, Bolton and Boyd's analysis highlights employees' own skilled and self-willed management of feelings and their resulting resistance capacities. This effectively reflects employees' coping practices and notions of common sense as responses to contradictory work environments. But, it underestimates the contradictory character of these coping practices, the limited character of action potential they produce, and the processes of alienation, submission, and adaptation that are at play simultaneously. As Lloyd and Payne put it, there is a risk in such an argument to take coping with badly designed work processes as a skill or resistance, or, to interpret boredom, pretence, and offering sympathy to customers not only as resistance but as worker control, task discretion, and skill (Lloyd/Payne 2008: 19-22). The point in this is not to negate employees' own, self-willed, autonomous and resisting forms of emotion management (or labour practices in general), but to recognise that these are

also coping practices in the face of concrete labour requirements which require employees to “balance (...) conflicting demands” (Llyod/Payne 2008: 4; translation K.C.).<sup>71</sup>

Korczynski's argument displays a similar focus on resistance practices. For him, it is not employees' feeling rules, but rather management strategies of cost reduction and service quality enhancement that are depicted as clearly opposed, contradictory, and conflicting trends. In this, cost reduction imperatives are seen to dominate over the goal of service quality. The result is a 'bureaucratisation' of work organisation and service interactions, which restricts the margins for effective participatory, normative control strategies. Consequently, the latter only can achieve a limited grip on employees' subjectivity while new margins for resistance develop.<sup>72</sup> Such attention to the contradictions within management strategies is absolutely crucial for the analysis of labour control and its limits. Thus, Korczynski can show how firms extend not only their indirect control strategies via participatory offers and decentralisation (which might enter in conflict with rationalisation aims). But, in order to bridge the gap between both aims of cost reduction and service quality, mechanisms of direct control (beyond supervising material work performances) get more and more directed towards employees' subjectivity - attempting to discipline employees' social behaviour, their body, and appearance by means of strict codes of conduct, training, and open or hidden supervision. Yet, Korczynski's concept of bureaucratisation tends to underestimate the fact that normative labour control and corporate culture initiatives function not only as strategies to control employee subjectivity and assure a maximum service attitude (and from this perspective might get 'distorted' by imperatives of cost reduction). Rather, they also constitute means to achieve workforce alignment with the intensification of work processes underlined by Ezzy. They aim at transferring contradictory competitive requirements onto the employees,

---

<sup>71</sup> Llyod and Payne particularly critique the skill debate, or the debate on emotional labour as specific frontline service skill. They continue: “the problem of ‘bad jobs’ - stress, work intensification, tight controls, poor job design, low pay - becomes a problem of lack of skill (...) Such discourses can be used to fuel claims that we are witnessing a general trend towards universal up-skilling in a ‘knowledge-driven economy’, while also allowing a convenient veil to be drawn over dull, monotonous reality of much service sector work.” It moreover risks disguising management's strategies and intents, while “portraying work as skilled is part of management's normative control strategies aiming at creating commitment to service quality” (Llyod/Payne 2008: 20-21).

<sup>72</sup> A similar evaluation is given by Voss-Dahn in her analysis of work organisation in retailing: The specific requirements of customer service are seen to constitute a break for processes of flexibilisation and precarisation, and to create an additional potential for employees to gain power. Unlike Korczynski, Voss-Dahn considers the introduction of normative control as a limit of such new potentials for employee power (Voss-Dahn 2000: 14). Instead, Artus' insistence on employees' violated moral aspirations as a possible breaking point in management's strategies, on a first glance, seems in line with Korczynski's argument of contradictory management strategies, limiting effective labour control. Yet, Artus' argument does not refer to any necessarily limited effectiveness of normative, subjectifying management strategies, but to one side of employees' possible perception of the functional, strategic combination of both kinds of control (Artus 2008a).

fostering internalisation of resulting conflicts, and enhanced readiness to self-control and self-exploitation. In other words, both strategies should be analysed for their joint (though contradictory) outcomes, rather than as contrasting one another.

Notwithstanding this criticism, Korczynski's analysis offers interesting insight into collective forms of resistance at the level of everyday shop floor interactions and solidarity. He insists on the existence of "coping communities", understood as forms of informal, daily solidarity interaction through which employees socialise work related problems and conflicts. Similar to Bolton and Boyd's unmanaged spaces and practices of camaraderie, this might take the form of creating a collective space to voice pressures experienced and to alleviate and redistribute their effects by sustaining each other morally. Or, coping communities might engage in collective agency in order to address the underlying conflicts and obtain some change in work conditions. While the functions of coping communities in Korczynski's empirical cases largely remain on the level of moral support and ex-post releasing pressures,<sup>73</sup> he points to the central role such forms of "nascent solidarity" might play for future struggles over the nature of contemporary service work. He sees them as an important basis for unions to approach the issue of emotional labour and to integrate all three sides of the latter's triangle-like customer-worker-management relationship into their acting frame (Korczynski 2003: 75).

Similar to the criticism voiced with respect to Bolton and Boyd, such an optimistic vision of collective agency might neglect the expected contradictory character of such collective coping practices and their possible integration within the workplace context and management's control strategies. Therefore, such contradictions and possible integration are given special attention in the empirical investigation pursued here. Moreover, Brook criticises Korczynski's argument for being trapped in an "enchantment of 'personalised' customer service" as a prospect for "salvation" and happy workplace consent, while failing to offer the tools to criticise the ideology of customer capitalism and to make its structural conflicts visible (Brook 2007: 4). The concept of bureaucratisation consequently would fail to recognise issues or opportunities of collective interest struggles other than with regard to service quality. Brook attributes these weaknesses to the theory's Weberian foundations, or more precisely, its neglect of the exploitative and class character of service labour arising from capitalist relations of production.

---

<sup>73</sup> In Korczynski's cases, the workplace conflict to be dealt with collectively concerns irate and abusive customer behaviour. Coping communities developed as communities to share pain and frustration by offering a shoulder to cry or an opportunity to share cynicism. Aside from Korczynski's study, there is an important body of literature underlining the relevance of informal shop floor communities. For a brief summary see Korczynski (2003: 58).



Finally, a brief look is taken on Italian subject orientated labour studies. An upcoming research stream focusses on ethnographical investigations of concrete labour practices. The micro-analytical level and the category of labour as a practice are the central focus here. Emphasis is laid on the act of work itself as an interactive activity, comprising interaction with others and the material world, the means and materials of labour, and serving concrete practical ends. Such practices are conceptualised as situated, social, and crucially knowledge-based activities. This research strand (while still heterogeneous and fragmented) locates the analysis of current labour practices in the context of a Post-Fordist 'knowledge society' and the development of cognitive, immaterial labour. It also proposes 'labour practices' and 'practical knowledge' as central categories for a renewed Post-Fordist labour sociology (Negrelli 2005; Bruni/Gherardi 2007).

Taking labour practices as a starting point, similar to the labour process debate, and aside from the issue of skill and practical knowledge, daily practices of submission and resistance within work process become a central topic. Particular attention in this is paid to self-willed elements in employees' practices. To give an empirical example, Pentimalli analyses practices of noisy cooperation, resistance, and clandestine mockery on customers in a call centre (Pentimalli 2009). Comparable to the results derived by Bolton and Boyd and Korczynski, she finds diverse practices of collective sabotage and game-playing within this highly technologically rationalised and controlled work context. She describes a double bind of different professional and social role expectations that render employees' daily labour practices conflictive. While employees are expected by management to stick to their professional role as friendly telephone operators in front of customers, they must demonstrate distance from this professional role by talking badly about customers among colleagues in order to be part of the social shop floor collective. Pentimalli's analysis points out that such mockery is not autonomous, but an equally socially constrained practice.

A limit in these ethnographic studies results from their largely descriptive character. While the dense and detailed descriptions of concrete practices at the micro level are the strengths of these approaches, due to this descriptive orientation, they can offer only little analytical and critical reflection of observed practices. Moreover, they are mostly based on participant observations and rarely take into account employees' common sense or the way that they themselves give meaning to their labour practices (and also lack a critical understanding of such cognitive practices). Consequently, as in the case of the presented studies on work attitudes also this analysis of labour practices remains partial - though this time concentrating on 'the other part' of however closely connected cognitive and material subject practices.

### 3.4.3 Subject-oriented research on retail labour

This section turns to subject-oriented studies of retail labour. Four studies by Walters, Ferreras, du Gay, and Curcio focussing on this area are considered (Walters 2005; Ferreras 2003/2004, 2007; du Gay 1996; Curcio 2002). Walters' analysis concentrates on work attitudes, employee commitment, and satisfaction. Du Gay is more interested in the margins of manoeuvre employees have in the face of management's control, and in the effects on their identity formation. Both authors write from a perspective of labour process theory, asking how workplace consent is established. Like du Gay, Ferreras and Curcio also analyse employees' coping practices. Ferreras uses an ethnographic approach. While concentrating on employees' meaning constructions on the individual level, she puts an additional focus on the practical conditions of collective agency (as well as employees' cognitive collective orientations and capacities). Although collective practices are not a central element in Curcio's analysis, his research approach seeks to increase such collective capacities. Using a militant research approach, his analysis is based on a collective discussion process with retail employees aimed at producing practically relevant and ideology-critical knowledge about each employee's own agency context. While Walters' work focusses on the effects of flexibilisation, Ferreras adds the analysis of labour control in terms of an 'authoritarian workplace regime.' Only du Gay and Artus explicitly address the issues of subjectification and normative control: as "government of enterprise" aimed at increasing work load for du Gay, and as strategy of "repressive integration" for Artus.

With respect to all in the following mentioned critique or still open points of questions, the high relevance and value of all these four studies should be clearly underlined. They are some of the few researches in this field of retail labour which do address the issue of labour change at the level of employees' everyday experiences, and which combine this subject-oriented shop floor analysis with the question of collective agency and political consciousness (as particularly in the case of Ferreras and Curcio).

Turning to a brief, introductory overview over empirical results, also in the case of retailing, the issues of recognition, participation, autonomy, and responsibility within the work process are central for employees' conflict experiences (as in the above presented more general studies on work attitudes). The deception of these aspirations here is caused by authoritarian workplace regimes and repressive management strategies, as these bring with them a daily experienced de-valorisation of shop floor common sense and employees' production, or rather their service knowledge and an increase in workload, pressures, and experiences of precarisation.

Employees' capacities to construct positive self-representations, to appropriate and defend available margins of autonomy, and to carry their own values, identities, and private selves into the workplace prove to be important coping practices in the face of such dissatisfying work conditions. Moreover, employees practice diverse strategies of rejecting both labour requirements and participatory attitudes: by reducing their own labour performances (in hidden ways) or by sticking to the old hierarchical rules, by practicing a mental withdrawal from work, or a cynical distancing. In adapting to these labour conditions and reducing experienced conflicts, naturalisations are important, as well as what is described as 'culture of tolerance.' For other frontline service labour, conflicts with costumers appear as central, and their personalisation is an important way to smooth and transform such conflicts from a question of work conditions and (emotional) control into an issue of personal character and behaviour. Similar to the emotional labour debate, the retail studies considered here present ambiguous outcomes on collective coping practices. Aside from insisting on a lack of collective reactions, resources, and capacities in the face of customer or other conflicts, there are also some signs of existing forms of shop floor solidarity. Collectively, the authors point to the limited degree of action potential gained by employees with these coping practices in the face of highly unequal power positions.

Walters' (2005) study on work attitudes of part-time female retail employees in Britain emphasised that employees practice strategies of 'satisficing' as a way to cope with unattractive work conditions and work related conflicts resulting from flexibilisation (particularly of work contracts and work times). For example, satisfaction is gained from the fact of being employed at all rather than from the precise work and its context. This idea of 'satisficing,' as way of making bad work conditions look better, seems similar to what Fullin names a progressive adaptation of employees' expectations, or to the importance given by Hall and Atkins to employees' perceptions of their own control.

Walters, moreover, points at the role that an employee's social position outside the work place has on their attitudes and perceptions of work. Her study especially underlines the relevance of female employees' position within hierarchically structured gender relations and the social regulation of reproduction. Finally, similarly to Murgia's work, work attitudes are perceived as changing over time. Instead of ascribing fixed ideal type work attitudes to individuals, Walters argues that women's positions might change over the life course (and vary depending on their current life situations and reproductive duties) along a continuum of work attitudes ranging from work experienced as a mere necessity to sustain (family) reproduction

(“homemakers”), attitudes of status preservation and satisfaction within previously obtained employment conditions (“stickers”) all the way to an enlarged commitment to work as a means of personal and career development (“aspirers”).<sup>74</sup> While engaging in such a critique, her model remains within the Weberian paradigm of ideal type construction. While ideal types in her understanding are more smooth and take shifts of individual’s position into account, within her model it still remains difficult if not impossible to assess contradictions within employees’ orientations and combinations of (seemingly) contradictory attitudes at the same time as outcomes of coping and confrontation with (interest) conflicts. Besides, what is missing from this account is the influence of the concrete work context in terms of work organisation and control.

This level of labour processes and control is more extensively considered in Ferreras’ (2003/4; 2007) research on the work attitudes of female cashiers in Belgian supermarkets. These attitudes are explicitly located within a context not only of flexibilisation, but also in what she analyses as an ‘authoritarian workplace regime’ (see section 3.3.2). In this, Ferreras is not interested in cashiers’ orientations to flexibility or control as such, but more precisely in their expressive work attitudes and the public and political relation to work they develop in a situation of increasing work time flexibility. She focusses explicitly on the collective dimension of employees’ work-related constructions of meaning and insists in the relevance of collective resources and capacities as the best chances employees have in facing and overcoming precarisation. Ferreras’ study is of special interest here as it sharply analyses several meaning constructions of employees as coping practices in front of daily experienced conflicts.

The main field of conflict observed in this study concerns workplace hierarchies and control regimes. Again, contradictions evolve around the issue of participation - or, in Ferreras’ terms, around employees’ everyday experiences of an authoritarian workplace regime, which do not match their strong aspirations of a democratic work context. In fact, the existing work organisation is negatively experienced, based on arbitrary decision powers of superiors combined with a system of exchange of favours. In this context, reactions of employees to the introduction of a more participatory mechanism of work time regulation provides a further example of ‘satisficing’ coping practices and perceived control: They declare themselves as satisfied with the new participatory practices and are ready to take the responsibility it offers or requires of them, although the actual and experienced possibilities for collective self-

---

<sup>74</sup> With these categories, Walters refers to an earlier central work of Hakim, which she criticises for its static perception of women’s work attitudes and their ascription as fixed part of their character.

regulation linked to the new system lack behind employees' expectations and understandings of democratic organisation. As in Matuschek et al.'s analysis of call centre labour, employees try to appropriate and defend any available, even if limited, margins of autonomy - though here on a largely mental or symbolic level. To them, the mechanism of collective work time regulation constitutes an opportunity to express their aspirations in participation - for which they are ready to make concessions in terms of stability and real decision power. Ferreras insists that such employee aspirations in participation develop even in very hierarchically structured work places. This leads to the conclusion that they can be considered as universally intrinsic interests not limited to specific contexts of high qualification and/or especially permissive and participatory management strategies.

The second main contradiction detected in this study is between an individual's experience of work as political,<sup>75</sup> and the lack of any collective articulations of such political experiences in terms of mutual support and a perception of work as a collective (and not merely individual) relation. This corresponds with the position advanced by Pongratz and Voß regarding merely individually and not collectively articulated endogenous expressive interests. In going beyond any simple statement of such individualisation as a supposedly given fact, Ferreras explains this absence with employees' incapacity to construct an 'unavoidable and impartial interlocutor' - or, in other words, to perceive a common and identifiable enemy. The most evident reasons indicated for this incapacity are, first, the actual dissolving of any fixed, sizable counterpart. This is due to a constant restructuring of firms combined with recurrent changes in management positions that follow from a firm's integration in big, often multinational corporations. Second, the scarcity of collective articulations reflects a corresponding shortage of collective material resources and collective cognitive capacities.<sup>76</sup> Unlike Artus (and later on also Curcio) who insist in management's direct repression of collective interest representation, Ferreras highlights crucial missing collective resources as being opportunities, time, and infrastructure for interaction and exchange among colleagues - resulting not least from stressful work environments, precarious employment positions, and flexible, diversified work times. However, also in her case, lacking effective enforcement of

---

<sup>75</sup> Political experiences of work are defined by Ferreras as practices in which employees relate to others and that involve a sense of justice. Such a political understanding of work includes being interested in a collective, democratic management of work times, which employees can express through mechanisms of work time flexibilisation. This definition can be criticised for neglecting the issue of interest conflicts and struggles as a central element of political agency - instead of supposedly universalist or taken for granted concepts of justice.

<sup>76</sup> Ferreras makes a distinction between different material and cognitive resources and capacities with reference to Sen. In Sen's approach, an individual's capacities (to live a free life) depend on their disposal over certain resources, as well as on personal, social, and environmental 'conversion factors,' which enable individuals to make use of the available resources. That is, the distribution of resources on all these three levels results in distinct capacities. But, these capacities represent only potential possibilities of acting. Their accomplishment is conditioned by the social context and the choices individuals are able to make (Ferreras 2008).

(formally existing) collective rights and labour standards - and thus effective collective interest defence - prove problematic. Further challenges include limited cognitive capacities, such as missing knowledge and information about the work place and the collective structures of worker representation. Yet, these limits of collective capacities are also linked to each employee's own constructions of meaning, as these result in a merely interpersonal experience of social relations, making it harder to generalise from one's own individual situations and recognise potential common problems and interests.

Ferreras lists a whole range of reasons deriving from an individual's common sense, which can be interpreted as cognitive coping practices to face limited collective acting capacities. These include: First, a 'culture of tolerance,' that is the perception of different interests at the work place as all equally justified. This is similar to employees understanding of the employment relations as a 'give and take,' as described by Hall and Atkins. As for the strategy of personalisation, which is present also among Ferreras' cashiers, such a belief in the work place as an egalitarian space allows employees to downplay or to naturalise experienced conflicts. Second, naturalisation passes through auto-stereotyping. Female cashiers explain conflicts they experience with the work and/or among each other as a result of women's supposedly natural character as quarrel-mongering nanny goats. According to Ferreras, beyond the effectiveness of gender stereotypes within employees' common sense, such auto-stereotyping reflects the fact that employees internalise the low social status attributed to female dominated cashier work. Finally, cashiers appear to have effectively internalised and adapted to the 'customer-first' orientation propagated by management. In consequence, conflicts on the level of employee-customer relations appear as out of reach for any problem solving intervention. Instead, they are again naturalised and normalised as part of the 'necessities of the market rule.'

Similarly to Fullin, Dörre, and Ezzy, the work of Ferreras stresses the precariousness and dangers inherent in these coping practices particularly with regard to collective action potential. Besides negative effects on employees' physical and psychological well-being, she criticises the economic inefficiency (waste of human resources and fostering of disinterested work attitudes) and, above all, the risks this entails for the future of democracy. The latter would develop from a lack of social learning processes, producing negative effects on collective capacities in the entire society, and particularly in terms of political disinterest and easy affection by extreme rightwing ideologies.

Notwithstanding this importance of collective capacities and their blockages, the noted lack of collective articulations might however be stated in too absolute terms in Ferreras work.

Taking into account the more varied and ambiguous outcomes of the emotional labour debate, shop floor solidarity and everyday support among colleagues might appear as under-evaluated here (in all their contradictory forms and effects). In addition, aside from a participatory model of work time organisation, Ferreras' study does not address management's participatory and normative control strategies. In a highly valuable and illuminating analysis, it remains however largely focussed on the authoritarian character of the observed workplace regime – and, consequently, also on employees' reactions to such authoritarian control and less to participatory management strategies and their identitarian and normative interpellations. Yet, it should be underlined that even - or especially - in this authoritarian context, employees' aspirations in participation, recognition, and their own control emerge as a central field of conflict.

It is precisely this issue of indirect labour control and identitarian interpellation that is in the centre of du Gay's research interest (1996). Du Gay investigates employees' work attitudes and their perceptions of current management strategies of flexibilisation and subjectification. Clearly reflecting labour process theory, this investigation serves as a means for analysing power relations at the workplace and beyond. In his book, du Gay examines employees' and lower managements' responses to what he calls the 'government of enterprise' (see section 3.3.2). Two main fields of tensions emerge from this analysis. First, the cultural change to be introduced by the management's strategies of 'governing' the enterprise is perceived by employees as an attack to and a de-valorisation of their established shop floor common sense, and thus, of their production knowledge. Second, the effectively experienced outcomes of management's participatory strategies clash with the aspirations of employees regarding participation and self-realisation. Possibilities for cultural change appear bounded by the cultural heritage employees would have to counter, in terms of a firm's history and overcoming structures as well as employee biographies and identities. Interesting here is employees insisting on their own production knowledge, their effectively enacted responsibility, and consequently, their sense of ownership over 'their' firm. The interests of recognition partly coincide with management's governance strategies. Nonetheless, they get deluded because of a lack in verbal and financial recognition, as well as insufficient opportunities for employees to express their sense of ownership, responsibility, and production knowledge. In sharp contrast to such desired opportunities, according to du Gay, employees experience the new management strategies as an increase in workload and pressures. Similar to Ferreras, du Gay calls attention with these findings that employees carry

expressive interests in self-realisation and participation even into largely authoritarian work contexts. Instead of Ferreras' focus on employees' 'democratic' aspirations, du Gay 'only' insists on their interest of being recognised as responsible and capable actors within the given firm labour process (and its management dominated organisation). In other words, he focuses on the integrative rather than the potentially disruptive effects of employees' participation-related aspirations - although (or because) his study was based on a fundamentally different, though still authoritarian workplace regime with more participatory and normative elements. Employees' reactions to such discrepancies range from helpless inability to adapt to the new conditions and a consequent retreat from social relations with colleagues, all the way to the appropriation of newly gained margins of action for one's own interests. Most pronounced as an effect, however, seems to be the spread of conflicts in interactions with colleagues or customers. On both levels, du Gay observes the formation of friend-enemy relations between groups of workers or in the perception of employee-customer relations. Such a group formation can be interpreted, as du Gay has, as an expression of a collective spirit in opposition to management's individualising strategies, which are part of the government of enterprise. Alternatively, and this remains largely disregarded by the author, it also represents a transfer of conflicts emerging from stressful work conditions and enhances workforce fragmentation and competition, although in this perspective between groups instead of individuals. These problematic effects of conflicts between employees on collective identity formation and agency have been pointed out above with reference to Artus' research on precarious service labour. Du Gay's argument, in contrast, shows some similarities to Korczynski's exaltation of shop floor coping communities as nascent forms of solidarity.

In du Gay's sample, using management mandates of self-regulation as strategies for one's own ends, is only a valid option for lower management. On this issue, du Gay draws a clear divide between relative power positions of two different groups of employees that he studied. More feasible for shop floor assistants seems to be sabotaging the management's discourse of enterprising and participation by sticking to the old rules of hierarchical interaction while fulfilling requested work tasks. We will return to this in a second. Before, a final strategy used by employees to respond to management's attempts to invade their subjectivity is considered. This concerns the appropriation of management's logic of blurring boundaries between work and life by carrying one's private life and identity into the work place. Lower management, for example, turns the work place 'into home' by inviting friends to meet them on the job (at the work place, not necessarily during work times). In another case, shop floor employees



deal with hated, subjectivity reducing uniforms (imposed as part of the new corporate identity) by accessorising them with elements of personal clothing and decorations.

For shop floor employees, margins to manoeuvre these different attempts of appropriation become especially limited once they are in conflict with core elements of managements' enterprise strategy. In the uniform example, threatening employees with dismissal makes all personal accessories disappear again. Similarly, acting capacities are also limited where employees try to stick to the old hierarchical rules. Du Gay here refers to an example of quality management in which employees limit their contribution to problem solving and process improvement to the absolute minimum necessary to prevent admonition. While in the end, they contribute to the requested formulation of common goals, but do so in a way that clearly demonstrates their lacking adherence to any corporate identity or enterprising self-responsibility: They sticking to the old pattern of hierarchical communication by giving only brief answers to questions from superiors without entering into any discussion and development of thoughts on their own.

As argued in the theory chapter, this limited effect of employees' coping strategies reveals the ambiguous character of what du Gay, referring to de Certeau, calls employees' 'tactics of consumption:' While employees might challenge the meanings attributed by management to the processes of organisational change with their own meaning constructions, their agency always remains inscribed into and limited by the power relations of the workplace. Missing in this account is the question of how employees cope with the 'dissidence' of meanings noted by du Gay. To determine possibilities for change and enlarged action potential, it could have been helpful to make visible employees' own perceptions of their action potentials and their limits - as well as the opportunities and conditions for facing conflicts and challenging management strategies that they consider possible. Above all, it would have been necessary to go beyond the level of individuals' adaptation or appropriation, by analysing more extensively the existing forms, potentials, and limits of collective agency.

Unlike du Gay, the analysis presented by Curcio leaves more scope for employee resistance, or at least a clandestine rejection of labour requirements and identitarian interpellations. As a collective, participatory process, this work questioned employees' perceptions of their work realities and action potential. This is done by rendering visible hidden routines, logics, social relations, and their dynamics which usually stay masked by common sense (Curcio 2002: 15, 66-84). Crucially, employees are considered here not objects but subjects of the knowledge production.

The most common strategy in the face of what Curcio describes as a ‘totalitarian firm’ is adaptation: Employees use identification with the company myth and corporate identity as a way to reduce experienced conflicts, to push them away from their perceptions of reality, and feel less impacted. However, such adaptation has its limits, as stories about psychological disturbances, namely depression, and routine recourse to various pharmacological products show. Further strategies to reduce perceived conflicts and sustain endurance are maintaining transition expectations or insisting in immediate personal needs (such as paying a mortgage) as motivating and requiring such endurance. Also, making comparisons to worse or lacking alternatives, as well as naturalisations, are powerful constructions of meaning. Normalisation of high levels of suffering is handled using diverse strategies of mental withdrawal. These comprise disassociating oneself from work, its contents, and social relations at the workplace, as well as becoming emotionally indifferent from others, being mentally absent from work by keeping silent, thinking as much as possible about other things during work, and/or developing strictly instrumental attitudes towards work and concentrating oneself instead on one’s private life (as in Dubet et al’s study).

A further practice of mental border drawing is what Curcio calls ‘disguising:’ hiding actual disagreement or lack of engagement behind a routine smile and consistently maintaining a polite attitude in front of customers, colleagues, and superiors. Such border drawing is presented by Curcio not only as an adaptive practice, but also as a resistance strategy, although it remains compatible with the company context. Employees practice more or less hidden forms of resistance by allegedly respecting given rules, meeting behaviour expectations in front of customers, and being available to management’s requests. Nonetheless, they take days off while pretending to be sick, reduce their own performance through slow work, or, in a more open and risky way, by limiting their availability to written contractual obligations. These rejections are supported by another form of mental distancing: The ironic distancing from work conditions and one’s own agency. Employees may also pursue hidden forms of witnessing like taking notes and writing about their suffering.

Curcio particularly insists that such border drawing starts from a need for self-defence, but nonetheless constitutes a form of resistance. It implies rejection of unlimited availability requests, produces risks (of being discovered and punished for actual limited availability), and requires energy to keep up appearance and endure the subsequent dissociation of identity. In fact, Curcio’s analysis strongly suggests linkages between adaptive and resisting coping practices. For example, the different practices of mental border drawing might support the normalisation of suffering as well as the rejection of availability requirements. Yet, in

Curcio's book, these connections are not further investigated. The appropriation of corporate identity measures and margins of autonomy do not appear as a possibility here.

### ***3.5 Conclusion: open questions and focal points for the empirical research***

This conclusion summarises the central insights and relevant gaps of current labour studies, particularly concerning the subject-oriented contributions. It sketches out a research agenda for the empirical investigation undertaken, outlining the starting point, the open questions, and the critical points to address in a subject-oriented, ideologically critical, and emancipatory perspective.

The literature review on the flexibilisation and subjectification of labour showed a general, though gradual processes of precarisation with multiple requirements of self-regulation across all forms of employment and in all sectors. In the following analysis of Milanese large scale retailing, this line of argument is taken up particularly in the assessment of management strategies (chapter six) and employees' conflict experiences (chapter seven). Consequently, empirical analysis on this level seeks to determine whether and how management strategies of flexibilisation, subjectification, enforced Neo-Taylorist supervision and repression are linked, how they work together to produce workforce alignment, and how they jointly generate subjective experiences of precarisation as well as specific fields of conflict, possible breaks, and contradictions.

The studies presented in the literature review already suggest two central fields of conflict within changing work and employment conditions: First, the increasing precarisation of work and employment conditions combined with high performance pressures. Experiences of precarisation do not only result from unstable employment prospects, an uncertain future, and unfulfilled hopes in employment transition and/or stabilisation. They are also provoked within the labour process by the constant need for self-activation and unlimited availability, which are produced by subjectifying management strategies. A particular experience within frontline service labour seems to be the high degree of repression and violence these management strategies are associated with. The second central conflictive issue is employees' aspirations in self-regulation, participation, and autonomy within the labour process. This is also, or especially, the case in strictly controlled, repressive workplace regimes and low qualified

frontline services. These jobs entail a particularly strong dressing of personalities through required emotional and aesthetic labour performances.

Crucial in employees' articulation of both these fields of conflict is the lacking recognition of moral values and expectations of justice. Justice expectations are violated by precarious work and employment conditions, as well as by insufficient margins of autonomy, which are interpreted as a lacking recognition for given work performances and availability. Against such everyday experiences, employees claim recognition as self-responsible, performing corporate actors. Within frontline services, such justice expectations, experiences of violation, and claims for recognition appear as particularly virulent with respect to the interaction with customers and the associated values of good service. Although some of the studies considered these two conflict fields of precarisation and participation as contradictions or as specific for different employee groups with different employment status, qualification levels, and in different control context, they should be investigated as reflecting two simultaneous and general interests in both stability and autonomy. In addition, the issue of recognition and related conflict experiences within existing research is too often interpreted as indicating a shift from material, instrumental to immaterial, expressive labour interests. There is a need to better understand how recognition emerges as a central conflictive topic, and how this is linked to everyday experiences of material work conditions and precarisation, as well as repressive, and/or subjectifying, normative management strategies. For this purpose it is moreover necessary to analyse the role of claims for recognition as coping practices.

Interpreted on the backdrop of the above exposed theoretical frame, the subject-oriented studies discussed here suggest a range of concrete coping practices, which should receive particular attention in the following empirical analysis (chapter eight and nine). Summing up the empirical results from the employment related subject-oriented studies, various adaptive coping practices emerge: compensatory insistence in work task satisfaction, transition expectations, and progressive adaptation of expectations. Moreover, practices of border drawing are particularly important in dealing with strong frustration, the experienced limited individual action potential, and the permanent exposure to precarisation and requirements of self-activation. Thus, non-identification with a current job appears as central means to create a distance between oneself and the precarious employment position. This is vehemently expressed by employees in terms of company disloyalty and the alternative reference to self-realisation, one's own qualifications and professional development (as own values and distinct from the expected corporate participation), especially but not only for the segment of

‘knowledge workers’. Employees’ capacities to create positive self-representations prove central for both the strategies of adaptation and border drawing alike. Coping is further sustained by diverse cognitive strategies to reduce experienced conflicts: normalisation, naturalisation, comparison with others, or reinterpretation of constraints as one’s own choices. Subject-oriented research focussing on the labour process highlights how the degree of consent to management control, subjectification, and flexibilisation depends not only on differences in the employment status, but on employees’ social background, such as age, gender, education, and labour market positions. Moreover, different degrees of integration offered by management to different workforce fractions appear important, as well as employees’ own professional aspirations, their concepts of labour relations (as a ‘give and take’), and their perceptions of effectuated own control (rather than of actual results obtained through granted margins of autonomy). Especially these latter aspects are of interest and should be further explored as they point to the possible force of employees’ meaning constructions against counter-factual, contradictory everyday experiences. While some of the researchers indicate moral orientations as sustaining workplace consent (either by producing a perception of the labour relation as a win-win situation, or by backing up a compensatory, privatising withdrawal from dissatisfying work conditions to a ‘decent private life’), others insist on such moral justice aspirations as possible breakpoints at which conflicts with management strategies could become virulent. Thus, the apparently ambiguous role of such moral orientations and justice aspirations requires further investigation. In addition to such moral-based, privatising withdrawal, in frontline services, emotional withdrawal from the service interaction in the form of ‘surface acting’ results as important practices of border drawing - be it interpreted as sign of alienation or resistance. Additional practices of reducing and normalising conflicts stemming from labour process oriented research are the personalisation of conflict experiences, that is their attribution to character traits, and their simultaneous externalisation and naturalisation as necessary, unavoidable market forces. Finally, the development of collective action potential appears ambiguous and problematic on both levels of the employment relation and the labour process: As to employment-related research, collective support networks appear as decisive for coping (family bonds offering moral and financial support, and professional networks particularly facilitating job entrance and competence development).<sup>77</sup> Yet, they are themselves endangered by precarisation (risk

---

<sup>77</sup> The importance of professional networks can be considered specific to ‘knowledge’ or other higher qualified and/or quasi self-employed labour. They play a reduced role in the empirical cases of retail labour considered in this study. Nonetheless, social relations are important in this field as well to find job alternatives and/or occasional secondary occupations to integrate monthly incomes in the case of part-time employment.

of overload of families, reduced energies to maintain professional and social networks, as well as difficulties to position and perceive oneself within a social collective). Labour process related research, in turn, highlights the existence and importance of ‘coping communities’ on the shop floor, offering moral support and pressure release (through collective humour, clandestine mockery, and sabotage). But, they also point to the problems of increasing competition, rivalry and workforce fragmentation, lacking experiences and resources of collective interest defence in a context of repressive management strategies (including forced integration through corporate identity and strong performance pressures as well as anti-union pressures), and resulting high individual vulnerability. Especially the interpretation of increasingly personalised workplace relations and their effects on collective action potential remains an open, contentious question.

Looking at the emerging specificities of retail labour within this overall frame, frustration with precarious employment conditions and repressive management strategies that deny aspirations in participation and recognition appears as particularly strong and fostering significant emotional withdrawal. Simultaneously, capacities of appropriation and resistance against management’s requests seem to be very limited. Pronounced experiences of exploitation and lacking recognition, as well as limited individual action potential, are linked to the particularly unequal power relations on the shop floor. These result, first, from an authoritarian workplace regime and the clearly confined character of functional margins of participation and autonomy this provides. On this backdrop, the present study on Milanese large scale retailing has to take account of experiences of precarisation both in terms of ‘new’ flexibilisation and also concerning ‘old’ conflicts on the intensification of labour or rather in the combination of intensification and subjectification.

Second, in retailing, there seems to be a particularly serious lack of collective action potential and organising that enhances these unequal power relations. Beyond the question of institutionalised collective interest representation, the retail-related studies confirm the ambiguous development of collective attitudes and shop floor solidarity. On the one hand, they highlight the existence of a collective spirit, a political understanding of work, and/or a subjective need for collective action and interest representation. But, on the other, individualised thinking and lacking practical, as well as cognitive, capacities to counter individualisation and individual vulnerability appear as serious problems. While coping communities appear important for facing and alleviating daily problems, conflicts among colleagues are equally strong and disturbing experiences. Yet, the tensions between these two

developments - as entailing a transfer of conflicts, the formation of friend-enemy relations, and thus, drawing further lines of fragmentation within the workforce - are not sufficiently explored in the existing literature, even where this level of shop floor solidarity is explicitly considered. All in all, the presented subject-oriented retail studies mostly agree that resources lack for (institutionalised) collective interest representation and conflict, but they only explore practices of daily shop floor solidarity to a limited extent. Therefore, these areas receive special attention in the empirical analysis undertaken here (chapter nine) - not least in order to further investigate the ambiguous character of processes of personalisation and individualisation of labour relations and to overcome any dualist perception of both trends of fragmentation and cooperation on the shop floor.

All these detected coping practices serve as guidance for the empirical investigation in Milanese large scale retailing, to indicate what issues to pay special attention to during the interview evaluation and analysis. This analysis seeks to provide a detailed and explicit mapping of employees' daily acting and thinking by analysing it as coping practices. The goal is to offer a more encompassing investigation of how such coping practices emerge, how they are constructed, effectuated, and defended; and especially how different individual practices combine to form a whole out of which contradictions arise and how these are dealt with. On this basis, it should be possible to better understand how labour control and workforce alignment, but also opportunities for change are produced. For this purpose, coping practices need to be analysed as socially grounded practices. And that is, beyond the workplace, they have to be located within the overall context of current Post-Fordist society and its neoliberal regulation. This particularly regards the problems and perspectives of collective power positions and action potential. But, also on the individual level, inquiring into the contradictions and conflicts, the forms of consent-production and opportunities for change which arise from employees' work-related coping practices and common sense also means asking for breakpoints in neoliberal hegemony.

As elaborated above, current subject-oriented labour studies lack such an attempt of analysing employees' everyday practices as socially grounded coping practices in three crucial aspects: In some of the studies, there is a tendency to psychologise perspectives insisting on employees' lacking capacities of adaptation to the new requirements of self-regulation and flexibility (CENSIS 2003; Rieser 2004; Ferrari 2004; Porro 2004; Fullin 2004; Pongratz and Voß 2003; Dubet et al 2006). This is fostered by concentrating on participation and recognition as central conflict experiences. While this is an important outcome for low

qualified, highly controlled types of labour (sustaining the thesis of generalised requirements of and aspirations in self-regulation), this insistence becomes problematic where it replaces (or at least renders secondary and insufficient) the analysis of structural restraints of work and employment conditions as material sources of precarisation.

Above all, for all the studies considered, a perspective of social change is missing that includes an analysis of the terms and conditions for developing enlarged action potential. While some studies (Murgia, Armano) point to the relevance of practices of appropriation as entailed even in adaptive coping strategies, in general, this dialectic character of coping processes remains largely invisible in the studies focussing on experiences of precarious employment. This is different for those studies analysing employees' daily acting and thinking with regard to the labour process and management control. Here, practices of appropriation are a central element of the analysis. They comprise insisting in one's own service values, positive reinterpretations of perceived work conditions, using offered margins of autonomy for one's own ends, as well as forms of collective moral support and pressure release through humour and sabotage. Yet, as demonstrated, the existing research too often remains stuck in a dualist perspective, either highlighting such appropriation as resistance, or insisting in employees' final, absolute subordination.

A further point of critique is that employees' meaning constructions are too easily taken as a given, without a sufficient (ideologically-)critical analysis and distance. In contrast, Artus' insistence in the 'practical sense' of employees' adaptive strategies in the face of unequal power relations at the workplace and the fostering of their needs for recognition through precarisation should be taken serious. It shows the necessity to locate encountered subject practices within their power-structured social context. For this purpose, it is vital to analyse practical agency and cognitive coping practices together, in their interrelations and as both being routed in the confrontation with social context conditions - and not, as is still the case in most of the available subject-oriented research, focussing on only one of these sides.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> However, also in the empirical analysis of retail labour undertaken here, this challenge can be fulfilled only to a limited extent, as the research is based only on interviews, without participant observation. Consequently, any information on actual agency at the workplaces relies on employees' narrations, which always already represent forms of cognitive coping.



*Table 4: Subject-oriented insights from current labour studies*

<b>Effects of management strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Generalised, gradual processes of precarisation and subjectification</li> <li>➤ Interlinkages between repressive and participatory management strategies</li> </ul>
<b>Conflict experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Precarisation + increased performance pressures</li> <li>➤ Lacking margins of participation + self-regulation + autonomy</li> <li>➤ Lacking recognition of moral values + expectations of justice</li> </ul>
<b>Coping Practices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Adaptation: work task satisfaction + transition expectations + progressive adaptation of expectations</li> <li>➤ Border drawing: non-identification + surface acting</li> <li>➤ Appropriation: positive self-representations</li> <li>➤ Conflict reduction and transfer: normalisation + naturalisation + externalisation + personalisation + comparison + reinterpretation of constraints</li> <li>➤ High, ambiguous relevance of moral orientations</li> <li>➤ Relevant employee differences: employment status, age, gender, education, labour market positions, professional aspirations, concepts of labour relations, perceived own control, selective management strategies</li> </ul>
<b>Collective action potential</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Collective support networks + coping communities as decisive for coping</li> <li>➤ But: weakened by precarisation + increasing competition, rivalry, fragmentation + lacking collective experiences and resources</li> </ul>
<b>Retail specificities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Strong frustration with precarious employment conditions, repressive management strategies and lacking participation</li> <li>➤ Precarisation important both in terms of ‘new’ flexibilisation and ‘old’ intensification</li> <li>➤ Equally ambiguous collective attitudes, but particularly serious lack of collective action potential + strong conflicts among colleagues</li> </ul>
<b>Criticisms and research gaps</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Tendency to give psychological and individualising explanations for limited action potential</li> <li>➤ Often missing perspective of social change</li> <li>➤ Dualist perspective opposing control and resistance</li> <li>➤ Employees’ meaning constructions too easily taken as a given</li> <li>➤ Lacking joint analysis of practical agency and common sense</li> </ul>

## 4. The research field: Retail labour in Italy

This chapter presents the selected research field chosen for the investigation of subject practices: large scale retail in Italy. The question is what the above described social transformations towards a Post-Fordist mode of production and its neoliberal regulation look like in the Italian context and how they affect the retail sector.<sup>79</sup>

In a first step, the recent developments of (European) retailing in the context of a globalised, Post-Fordist economy are briefly described (4.1). Second, the specific Italian context conditions are illuminated. For this purpose, an overview is given over the specific Italian patterns of Post-Fordist development and retail modernisation (4.2), as well as over the current re-regulation of labour markets. Besides the state's labour market politics (4.3), the latter also regards transformations in the Italian system of labour relations (4.4). As regards collective actors, in addition to the level of institutionalised labour relations, initiatives of social movements on the issue of precarisation are included into this context picture (4.5). Finally, as a conclusion, the reasons for choosing Milanese large scale retailing as research field are summarised (4.6).

### *4.1 Transformations in the retail sector: Internationalisation and concentration*

Since the mid-nineties the retail industry in the European Union has been marked by a rapid internationalisation process that has led to a strong move towards concentration of capital and increasing competition.<sup>80</sup> This process fosters management strategies of rationalisation and price cutting. Concentration of capital is achieved through mergers and the integration of food and non-food branches within the same companies. In consequence, the retail market is also increasingly dominated by multinational corporations. Market structures, distribution systems, shop formats, as well as labour processes, become more and more similar across different countries. An important effect of these concentration processes is the growing size of outlet stores – that is, the development of large scale retailing structures and a downturn of small neighbourhood stores.<sup>81</sup> Simultaneously, within multinational retail corporations,

---

<sup>79</sup> This is meant as a contextualisation only - and not as an attempt to present any encompassing analysis of the retail sector's development or the specific Italian transformations from Fordism to Post-Fordism. A more detailed analysis of large scale retailing in Milan, in turn, is undertaken in chapter six, when presenting the findings of this empirical investigation.

<sup>80</sup> For information about the retail sector's structures see Jacobsen (2001, 2002) and Rudolph/Schüttpelz (2001).

<sup>81</sup> The definition of large scale retailing is far from unanimous. In the Italian context, the law on commerce (legge Bersani) limits it to firms with shops of more than 2.500m<sup>2</sup>. Yet, in a more encompassing understanding,

distribution chains are more and more integrated – with multinationals exerting important control over the prices of wholesalers and producers. Moreover, applying the principles of just-in time and fast-in time production leads to a reduction of stocks on the shop level and an acceleration of ‘distribution circles’ with reduced, flexible supply numbers only on demand. Stock operations, orders, and selling procedures are increasingly automated and digitized.

Regarding work and employment,<sup>82</sup> these developments are accompanied with important rationalisation and cutbacks in employment, as strategies to productively realise concentration processes and increase competition. First, such restrictive employment policies are closely linked and made possible due to growing shop sizes, as fewer staff is needed in such large-scale structures. Second, in a context of increasing concentration, margins for price competition are limited. The relatively few dominating, mostly multinational, companies have similar weight and influence on purchasing prices (Pellegrini 2005).<sup>83</sup> Therefore, competition is mostly carried out on two, potentially contradictory levels of labour costs and service quality. Reduction of labour costs calls for rationalisation, standardisation, intensification, and strict control of labour processes. Regarding service quality, in contrast, the affective, interactive aspects of retail labour, and thus, employees’ commitment within the work process gain increasing importance for management strategies, even within ‘anonymous’ large scale outlets. The goal of service quality, therefore, requires at least some decentralisation and employee autonomy in the service interaction, while workforce alignment and compliance with firm interests (be these cost reduction and efficiency or service quality) have to be assured at the same time. Consequently, corporate culture initiatives and other normative forms of labour control targeting employees’ effective self-control are introduced within a hierarchical, rationalisation focussed workplace regime (Voss-Dahn 2000).

A further effect of management’s (rediscovered) customer orientation is a run towards ever longer opening hours, including on Sundays. In the situation of strong cost and service competition, flexibilisation of employment is a further privileged strategy of cost cutting, as it allows for a more instantaneous adaptation of staff numbers to economic development as well

---

it might also comprise ‘organised’ large scale retailing: horizontally (one firm with lots of single outlet points) or vertically (uniting outlets, wholesalers, and possible also producers) integrated companies that have a series of small shops. Regarding the range of products sold, large scale retailing is differentiated into the branches of alimentary (supermarkets), non-alimentary (department stores), mixed alimentary and non-alimentary (hypermarkets), and specialised trade. Furthermore, it includes cash & carry (wholesale warehouses), as well as commercial centres as a further mixed category (Ballarino 2000).

<sup>82</sup> For more information about the development of employment, work organisation, and labour control in European retailing, see Frey/Montanino 1995; Kirsch et al 1999; Lehdorff 2001; Schüttpelz/Deniz 2001; and Voss-Dahn 2003.

<sup>83</sup> This represents an important difference to former periods where competition took place, first of all, between large scale outlets and small neighbourhood stores.

as to client fluctuations. Apart from some foreseeable special periods during the year (such as Christmas and summer holidays, for example), client fluctuation and turnover vary, above all, between the different days of the week and over each single day (with peaks on Fridays and Saturdays, in the morning and evening hours). Consequently, companies have a strong interest in increased work time flexibility and expanding opening hours. Aside from the flexibilisation of individual time schedules, this results in an increased employment of part-time labour.

#### ***4.2 Transformations in the Italian economy and retailing: Flexible specialisation and late modernisation***

The Italian mode of production presents a pointed example for the model of flexible specialisation (Piore/Sabel 1985; Jameson 1991; Harvey 1997).<sup>84</sup> It is, moreover, marked by a strongly unequal development between the north and the south of the country. Industrial development during Fordism mostly took place in the north and, to a large extent, it has always been based on small and medium sized enterprises settled around a few big industrial companies and centres. That is, the firm clusters typical for flexible specialisation are not completely new, Post-Fordist phenomenon here. The periphery of Milan, as the biggest industrial metropolis, witnessed this development pattern with a wide net of various production sites in the metal and chemical industry. Today this industrial structure is largely in decay. While that industry still continues to play an important role in terms of employment, the Milanese economy is more and more taking the shape of a financial, commercial, and fashion centre.

The focal point and pioneer area of Post-Fordist transformations in terms of flexible specialisation lies in the north eastern and the central regions. Since the 1980s, production clusters with sometimes very small scale but densely connected and territorially concentrated firms have developed in the textile industry - with Benetton as the most famous example. The south, in contrast, has always experienced a relatively limited industrialisation. The economy, and the agricultural production, relies to a large extent on illicit, informal labour and a cheap migrant workforce. Moreover, the influence of the mafia is high.

---

<sup>84</sup> The term “flexible specialisation” was coined by Piore and Sabel to grasp the effects of economic globalisation on company structures: namely the mutual formation of network-shaped transnational corporations and a highly fragmented division of labour between small specialised enterprises and (sub-)contractors. Similarly, Harvey speaks of a regime of “flexible accumulation”. In addition to the flexibilisation of employment, this concept insists more strongly on the international mobility of firms and production processes (both as reactions to conflicts within the Fordist regime of accumulation) than in their spatial relocation as production clusters. Jameson uses the same term of “flexible accumulation”. His analysis focuses on the cultural logic of postmodern capitalism (Jameson 1991; Harvey 1997).

Turning to the retail sector, it is equally characterised by a comparatively large number of small scale neighbourhood stores even today.<sup>85</sup> Italian retailing only recently went through important transformation processes. Deregulation of the retail trade took place only after the Bersani reform in 1998.<sup>86</sup> It was followed, however, by rather quick internationalisation and concentration processes. These can be observed in the closing of small businesses and a strong increase in large-scale outlets, especially since the end of the 1990s: While the overall number of shops fell from 871,700 in 1990 to 587,700 in 2001, the number of supermarkets grew by 10%, hypermarkets by 80%, and large specialised stores by 15% at the end of the 1990s. In the province of Milan, the number of retail businesses decreased from 40,000 to 36,000 during the 1990s (Istat, Economic Census 2001). In a European comparison, however, the resulting overall concentration has still remained quite moderate. The three largest retail enterprises (Coop, Auchan, Carrefour) hold a market share of ‘only’ 32% - compared to 95% in Sweden, between 50% and 70% in Great Britain, Germany, Austria, Belgium and France, and 44% in Spain (data for 1999, from Eurostat 2001). In Italy, small scale retailing still strongly influences the sector’s employment structure: Italian retail has a high share of self-employed workers (66.5% compared to an EU15 average of 31.5%) and a low average number of employees per shop (2.5) (Plotz 2002).

Regarding the development of retail labour, Italy (together with Germany) has been the EU-country that experienced the most disproportionate cuts in personnel numbers, compared to the sales trends during the 1990s.<sup>87</sup> In the province of Milan, employee numbers fell by about 10%, from 152,000 in 1991 to 138,000 in 2001 (Istat, Economic Census 2001).

In addition to such cutbacks, a further important employment trend in Italy was increasing flexible and minor employment. While overall employment in Italian retail trade rose again by about 8% in 2000, this upward trend was almost entirely due to the increase of ‘a-typical’ contracts. According to Jakobsen, between 1992 and 2000 such employment in the Italian retail industry increased by 45%, against only 0.7% for Fordist standard employment (Jakobsen 2002). According to data from the EU labour force survey and from the ISTAT national census, retailing accounted for 8.67% of overall employment in the EU25 in 2005 and 10.66% in Italy in 2001 (Eurostat 2005, 2008; Istat 2001). In contrast, referring to data

---

<sup>85</sup> Regarding the development of the Italian retail sector see Ballarino 2000; Pellegrini 2000; Potz 2002; Zanderighi 2003. And more specifically on large scale retailing: Pellegrini/Boroni 2004; Andrucciolo 2006.

<sup>86</sup> As part of this reform, an important law protecting small traders from competition was ended. Contingents (fixing limits for shop surfaces per inhabitant) were abolished and license practices binding retail businesses to fixed ranges of goods were simplified (by a reduction of product lists to two categories: food and non-food).

<sup>87</sup> Similarly, while legal opening hours have been liberalised in nearly all Western European countries, their actual extension was most remarkable in these two countries.

from Eurostat, and considering the development of retail employment over a ten year period, overall Italian retail employment between 1997 and 2007 experienced a small increase (from 3,252,800 to 3,540,800 employees), and reached a decisively higher share of overall employment of 16.12% in 1997 and 15.25% in 2007 than ISTAT data suggests. This share, however, is slightly decreasing. In the European Union, it has remained even more stable with 14.89% in 1997 (for EU-15) and 14.40% in 2007 (for EU-27) (Eurostat, Labour Force Survey, online database). In sum, employment cutbacks seem to have been concentrated in the 1990s, to be levelled out by new large scale shop openings and replaced by different forms of flexible and part-time employment. That is, employment politics might remain restrictive, but be increasingly concentrated on such flexible and minor employment.<sup>88</sup>

Within this Italian picture, the province of Milan constitutes one of the focal points of retail ‘modernisation’. In fact, transformations in the retail sector reflect the country’s economic cleavage between the north and the south. Multinational corporations mostly enter the Italian market in the northern regions and only step by step extend their activities to the south. Similarly, large scale retail outlets spread especially in the metropolitan areas of the north. Among these, Milan is characterised by an especially high density of large scale outlets, resulting in an over-saturation of the market, a particular high degree of competition, and resulting flexibilisation pressures on labour (Pellegrini 2005). Super- and hypermarkets are opened within close proximity to each other in order to impede a competitor’s market access. Under these conditions, it becomes a serious challenge to reach a turnover high enough to cover costs when competing for the same limited number of clients. All the more as this increasing competition occurs in the context of a general economic crisis that is marked by shrinking consumer demand even for alimentary products.

### *4.3 Transformations in Italian labour market regulations: Enforced liberalisation and flexibilisation*

In Italy, the regulation of Fordist ‘standard’ employment took a specific form, with a comparatively low level of institutionalisation. First, a dual system of collective bargaining has developed. Bargaining takes place on a sector-specific national level and a company level. That is, different for example from the German unitarian national contract per sector, in-house bargaining is important and opens various margins for informal, flexible arrangements.

---

<sup>88</sup> It is difficult to obtain data on the numerical development of flexible and minor employment. This issue is revisited in the empirical chapter on Milanese retail structures. For an exemplary empirical research on part-time labour in large scale retailing in the province of Emilia Romagna, see Poli/Sciortino (1995).

However, the sector's national contracts are binding also for this company-level bargaining, and their standards cannot be lowered.<sup>89</sup>

Second, Italy has only a reduced, very fragmented and, unequal welfare system. As typical for 'Mediterranean' welfare states it comprises only limited general unemployment benefits (for which twelve months of continuous contribution payments are necessary) and no national minimum income scheme (Ferrera 1996). In consequence, the protection this system offers against the risks of precarious employment is all the more limited. Instead, there is a strong tradition of employment protection focussed on the industrial core workforce, which is realised through state transfers (*cassa d'integrazione*), negotiated case-by-case and combined with an important public contribution-financed pension system. While Italy is among the EU-15 countries that spent less on employment policies, its pension expenditures are ranked above the medium. Minimum income schemes are organised only on the local level. Consequently, third-sector services and especially family bonds play a comparatively important role for the maintenance of people's social security (dell'Aringa/Lodovici 1997; Fargion 1997; Reyneri 2009).

Since the mid-1990s, important and controversially discussed re-regulations of the labour market (such as the 'Treu' pact and the 'Biagi' law) have taken place in this country, which was said to be characterised by rigid labour markets for a long time (Frey/Pappadà 2003). These re-regulations are often characterised as a "partial and targeted deregulation" (Esping-Andersen and Regini, 2000). That is, they focus on the "de-regulation of so-called non-standard or atypical employment relations for particular groups within the labour market - basically labour market entrants - but (leave) 'standard' employment and existing work contracts largely unchanged" (Barbieri/Scherer 2009). The effect is a recent, but fast development of various forms of flexible employment. For a long time, Italy displayed relatively low numbers of temporary employment (including fixed term contracts as well as interim labour) in a European comparison. In 2005, it nearly reached the EU average, with 12.3% versus 14.5% for the EU-27, according to data from the EU Labour Force Survey (Eurostat 2005).

Similarly, according to Italian statistics, 'non-standard' employment in this country in 2008 concerned 2.8 million workers, or about 12% of the employed workforce. In the ISTAT definition, however, such 'non-standard' employment concerns dependent and para-

---

<sup>89</sup> This dual system of bargaining and the resulting different forms of 'organised decentralisation' will be explained further on in section 4.4.

subordinate forms of temporary employment.<sup>90</sup> In addition, ISTAT calculates 2.6 millions of ‘partially standard’ employees (11% of all employed). These comprise all permanent dependent and self-employed workers with part time hours. This leaves a share of 77% for ‘standard’ employment, which in the ISTAT definition comprises permanent and full-time dependent as well as self-employment, and regards 18 million people. Yet, these numbers are often criticised for underestimating the actual amount of flexible employment. One of the problems is that ISTAT data only takes account of those employees who hold a temporary contract in the moment of surveying. All those temporary unemployed who are in a transition phase between two temporary contracts remain unconsidered. Moreover, ‘non-standard’ employment takes multiple forms, which are not all defined by contract status only. Further forms of precarious self-employment remain excluded, such as ‘partita IVA’ and ‘soci di cooperativa’.<sup>91</sup>

Referring to combined data from ISTAT, ISFOL and INPS<sup>92</sup>, a higher share of ‘non-standard’, temporary employment (again comprising dependent and para-subordinate employment) thus can be estimated at 18-19% of overall employment for 2008 (Coletto/Pedersini: 681-682). An identical share of 17-19% is calculated for the turn the century also by Barbieri and Scherer, but with reference to the entire working population (Barbieri/Scherer 2009: 1).<sup>93</sup> If, in addition, precarious forms of self-employment are included, ‘non-standard’ employment reaches 27% in 2008. In fact, according to data from ISFOL, permanent dependent employment (both full-time and part-time) accounts for 64% only. Together with the ‘old-style’ of veritable self-employment of independent professionals (‘liberi professionisti’, as different to the before mentioned precarious, often pseudo-independent forms), this results in 73% for what ISTAT calls ‘standard’ and ‘partially-standard’ employment together, instead of the 88% according to ISTAT data (Corsetti/Mandrone 2010; data from ISFOL-Plus for 2008).

---

<sup>90</sup> ‘Para-subordinate’ employment particularly refers to so-called ‘collaborations’, a specific Italian form of pseudo-self-employment and project work. For more explanations see below in this chapter.

<sup>91</sup> Technically, the ‘partita IVA’ is the fiscal code for an enterprise by which sales taxes are managed. As a name for a particular employment position, it refers to all sorts of self-employment, and thus of one-person micro-enterprises, for which sales taxes are paid. ‘Soci di cooperativa’ are members of labour cooperatives. Such cooperatives, originally developed as workers’ federations, but today they operate largely as a form of interim agency.

<sup>92</sup> The ISTAT is the national statistic institute (Istituto nazionale di statistica). The ISFOL (Istituto per lo Sviluppo della Formazione Professionale dei Lavoratori) is another public research institute in the field of professional training, social and labour politics. INPS stands for Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale. It collects the social contributions payments for most of the categories of dependent and independent employment.

<sup>93</sup> Barbieri and Scherer’s calculations are based on ILFI data. ILFI is a longitudinal panel study on Italian families carried out by the University of Trento in the years 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003 and 2005.



In the following, a more detailed look will be taken at the various labour market reforms which contributed to this flexibilisation of Italian employment since the mid-1990s. The ‘pachetto Treu’ (signed in 1997, under a centre-left coalition government with Prodi as prime minister) can be considered the peak in a chain of tripartite agreements that marked Italian labour market politics and industrial relations during the 1990s. The first important agreement in this sequence was signed in 1993. It established a new and important degree of formalisation of Italian labour relations. This enabled introducing flexible forms of employment on the basis of a formal contract between the two bargaining parties (Regalia/Regini 2004).

Next, the Dini reform in 1995 introduced so-called ‘CoCoCo’ (Collaborazioni coordinate e continuative) as a first form of legally regulated para-subordinated (or pseudo self-employed) labour: ‘Collaborators’ work on their own account, with reduced social security contributions, although generally under the direction of one single client or employer.<sup>94</sup> They constitute a hybrid form between autonomous labour and dependent employment. Italian labour law up to that moment officially only recognised these two kinds of labour. The Dini reform was originally based on a unions’ document. One central aim was to regulate and establish contribution payments for part of the informal sector. This reform produced important impulses for further debates and initiatives on the flexibilisation of the Italian labour market, as well as political and scientific discussions about related problems of precarisation (Frey et al. 2002).

With this backdrop, the major innovation of the ‘Treu-pact’ in 1997 was the introduction and formal, unitary regulation of certain forms of so-called ‘a-typical’ dependent employment. This concerned different forms of training contracts (‘apprendistato’ and ‘contratto di formazione e lavoro’) that previously had not been regulated at all, as well as state subsidised ‘socially useful work’ (work measures for long-term unemployed, with low pay and exempt from social security contributions, first introduced in 1991). Most importantly, it legalised interim labour (‘lavoro interinale’), which had so far been forbidden. The effect has been a marked increase in the flexibility of labour, especially regarding the work times and labour market entrance (Frey/Pappada 2003).

---

<sup>94</sup> Such ‘collaborations’ are designed as officially autonomous labour with ‘project’ based contracts and an autonomous disposition of the worker over his/her working times and places. In reality, they are most often realised as highly dependent forms of employment, entirely under the directive force of a single employer. They result in low paid, fixed term employment positions, which are exempt from any social security contributions, unlike formally subordinate temporary employment (Frey/Pappada 2003).

Following these reforms and tripartite agreements of the 1990s, the most encompassing legislative initiative was put into practice with the ‘Biagi law’ or ‘legge 30’ in 2003.<sup>95</sup> Introduced by the second Berlusconi government,<sup>96</sup> it reorganised the existing norms, and again introduced a whole range of new forms of flexible employment contracts. The ‘CoCoCo’ were re-regulated and partly substituted with a more restricted contract form, a so-called ‘project work.’ For this kind of work, the contract has to be related to a precise project or task, cannot exceed an income of 5000€ and a duration of 30 days. Part-time work has been made more flexible by increasing the employer’s decision power over work times, following a European Union’s directive.<sup>97</sup> Training contracts have also been restructured due to EU directives. The newly created apprenticeship contract is no longer a collectively regulated, but rather a purely individual contract. The training period has been extended to four years, but within this period licensing is easier than with normal contracts. Moreover, possibilities of interim labour have been extended in a way that seems to reduce the responsibility of user firms. Conditions for ‘socially useful work’ have been revised and are now named ‘collaborazioni occasionali e accessorie.’ Job placement has been further opened to private agencies, a process that was already started with the ‘pachetto Treu.’ In addition, apart from ‘project work,’ other new contract forms have been introduced. These are intermittent work or ‘job on call’ (‘lavoro a chiamata’), where the employee is available for work whenever (and only if) the employer needs him/her within a determined period of time, and ‘job sharing’ (‘lavoro ripartito’), with two employees self-organising the execution of the work among themselves, receiving one salary and acquiring social contributions together as if they were one single person (Frey/Pappada 2003).

Finally, the law 30 has also enhanced work time flexibility as it has introduced the possibility of so-called ‘flexibility and elasticity clauses’. These allow for spontaneous deviations from contractually fixed work time schedules and the number of part-time hours. As officially established in the law 30, these clauses have to be signed in a ‘voluntary’ agreement between individual employees and the firm, by which the employee declares himself/herself willing to

---

<sup>95</sup> The law was named after the author of a white paper on employment written for the ministry of labour and social politics in the second Berlusconi government. Marco Biagi was professor of labour law and economy at the Universities of Modena and Reggio Emilia and a consultant of the labour minister Maroni since 2001. He died in an assassination in Bologna in March 2002.

<sup>96</sup> This government was in office from June 2001 to May 2006 (with a reformation in April 2005) and formed by the centre-right coalition ‘Casa delle libertà’ consisting of Forza Italia, Alleanza Nazionale, Lega Nord, and UDC (Unione dei Democratici Cristiani e di Centro, one of the successors of Demorazia Cristiana). Since April 2005, it additionally included the Nuovo PSI and the Partito Repubblicano Italiano.

<sup>97</sup> The original Italian part-time law from 2000 (D.Lgs 61/00) sets stable work times as a norm. Hours have to be distributed regularly, either horizontally or vertically, over the days of the week. Unlike full-time employment, time schedules do not have to be regulated by collective bargaining. Instead, they have to be fixed only in the individual employment contract.

accept any changes against a minimum monthly compensation. In reality, these clauses are most often proposed to the employees at the moment of signing the employment contract, though on a separate paper. Thus, their acceptance effectively becomes a precondition for getting employed. Since 2007 (legge 247), these flexibility clauses have to be negotiated in collective bargaining that establishes its precise conditions, the notice given and the financial compensation to be received by employees.

After 2003, the most recent labour market (and welfare) reform was undertaken in 2007, once again by a centre-left coalition government, with the ‘law on the welfare protocol’ (law 247/2007) (Felletti 2007; precaridellaricerca 2007).<sup>98</sup> This law has had three main fields of intervention: fixed-term contracts, social security schemes, and the pension system. On all three levels, the scope of reform remained limited, as re-regulations mostly only confirmed or slightly changed existing practices, or introduced fragmented and restrained social security measures for flexible employment.

Regulations regarding the possible duration of fixed-term contracts were rearranged. A brief overview of the previous legislation is now provided to give a better understanding of these changes (Fellini 2001; Fullin 2004a). The original law 230 from 1962, which first introduced temporary contracts as an exceptional derivation from permanent employment, limited their use to cases in which permanent employment was not possible (in cases of substituting ill employees or seasonal forms of work). During the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, this limit was widened bit by bit. First, fixed-term contracts were also admitted during seasonal peaks in commerce and transport. In 1987, the definition of accepted reasons was left to collective bargaining. With the Treu pact in 1997, temporary employment was further liberalised and referred to as a means of labour market flexibilisation. Consequently, with the decree 386 from 2001, it was defined as an autonomous contractual typology. The decree allowed its use in case of technical, productive, and organisational necessities as well as for the replacement of temporary absent employees. Moreover, it regulated the duration of temporary employment: A fixed-term contract could be renewed only once (if it referred to the same work task), and the initial and the subsequent contract could not exceed a total duration of three years. Finally, a minimum time period between two temporary contracts of ten or twenty days was introduced (respectively for contracts with a duration of less or more than six months). In cases of a shorter break between two contracts, the consecutive contract was to be

---

<sup>98</sup> This law was based on the ‘protocol on providence, work, and competitiveness’. The latter was negotiated on a tripartite level and signed on June 23, 2007 under the second Prodi government. This government was in office from May 2006 to May 2008, and comprised by the parties: Democratici di Sinistra, Democrazia è Libertà/La Margherita, Rosa nel Pugno, Italia dei Valori, Popolo UDEUR, Federazione dei Verdi, and Partito rifondazione Comunista e Comunisti Italiani.

considered as a permanent one.<sup>99</sup> In 2007, the maximum number of consecutive temporary contracts was abolished and the limit uniquely set by the maximum total duration of 36 months (three years), now independently from the amount of contracts and the duration of breaks in between. Simultaneously, the possibility of adding a further temporary engagement to this time limit was introduced, if the latter is signalled to the competent state institution and agreed upon by a union representative.<sup>100</sup> Regarding employment flexibility, aside from this reregulation of temporary employment, the 2007 welfare law abolished the ‘job on call,’ which had been rarely used, and introduced a priority for internal temporary employees in cases of new recruitment.

In terms of the reregulation of social security schemes, first, unemployment benefits for dependent employees were increased from 50% to 60% of the most recent income, and from six to eight months in duration. At the same time, the main unemployment benefit mechanism for the dependent core workforce in industrial and large to medium sized companies, the short-time allowances, were reregulated in a way that makes dismissal easier. Second, pension contributions for para-subordinated employees were increased by 1% per year for three years. The purpose of this was to discourage the use of such employment forms, but a side effect was that the net wages are reduced because the increased contributions are paid by employees and employers alike. Still concerning para-subordinate employment, it was made possible to cumulate contribution payments from different kinds of employment and institutions. Moreover, instead of an equal coverage by unemployment schemes, special credits of up to 600€, with low interests and to be repaid within two to three years, were introduced for this category. Third, regarding wages directly, tax reductions for companies that pay and collectively negotiate performance-oriented wage shares were increased, and contribution payments for overtime supplements suspended.

With respect to the pension system, the law on the welfare protocol established an increase in the pension age from 58 years (and 35 years of contribution payment) in 2008 to 62 years (and 35 years of contribution payment) in 2013. Such an identical increase had been already previewed in the pension reform by Minister Maroni in 2003 under the second Berlusconi government. The only difference is that now the increase was thought of as a more gradual one than before. Besides increasing the pension age, the amount of the minimum pension scheme was slightly increased by about 30€ per month. In addition, pension contributions for dependent employees are now also paid during the first months of unemployment. Yet,

---

<sup>99</sup> This is the relevant legislation for the empirical study undertaken here, as interviews were conducted in 2006.

<sup>100</sup> The maximum duration of such supplementary fixed-term contracts has to be negotiated between employers and unions and was fixed in 2008 to eight months.

together with these augmentations, the coefficient by which annually acquired pension rights are calculated was reduced by about 8%.

Finally, to address the labour market and welfare politics of the current right-wing government,<sup>101</sup> pensions are again a central focal point of interventions (infoaut 2010, 2010b). A pending reform plans to increase the regular pension age to 63 years in 2015, 65 in 2031, and 66 in 2050 (always conditioned to a minimum contribution period of 35 years). For the first time, the access age for the ‘old-age pensions’ (accessible with contribution payments of 5 years, ‘pensioni di vecchiaia’) is to be increased from 65 years for men and 60 years for women to 66 and 61 in 2015, and 69 and 64 in 2050. Meanwhile, for female public employees, it will be raised in 2012 to 65 years, and, thus, to the respective men’s age.

Aside from this ulterior pension reform, the current government has not introduced any big, cohesive welfare reforms thus far. In response to the financial crisis starting in 2008 and the subsequent massive dismissals, only exceptional, politically negotiated social shock absorbers have been applied (such as prolonged short-time allowances), but no regular additional social security schemes introduced for the precarious workforce. All in all, current welfare politics seem to further accentuate the familiar shape of the Italian social security system, in the sense that the state only intervenes in extreme, exceptional cases where the family really does not manage.

Concerning labour market politics, the government declares in its recent ‘white book’ to focus on individuals taking increasing responsibility for themselves (Sciortino 2010).<sup>102</sup> Concrete further A liberalisation of flexible employment concerns temporary contracts: With an amendment to the decree from 2001, accepted legal reasons for temporary employment (technical, productive, organizational necessities, and replacement of temporary absent employees) are now also applied when no exceptional but regular, daily work tasks are concerned. That is, the original legal principle defining temporary employment as an exception was completely abandoned. In cases where legal regulations are violated, a temporary contract is no longer transformed into a permanent one. Instead, firm’s violating the law can now pay a compensation to the employee (Belluci 2008). In an ulterior step, the

---

<sup>101</sup> This is the third Berlusconi government. In office since May 2008, it comprises the rightwing coalition Popolo della Libertà and the Lega Nord. The former is a recomposition of Casa delle Libertà and was formed by Forza Italia, Alleanza Nazionale, and Democrazia Cristiana per le Autonomie. In 2009, it converged into a single party named Popolo della Libertà (Pdl).

<sup>102</sup> The minister of labour and social politics, Sacconi, argued that social security schemes should be focussed on heads of the family only. In this way, the current economic crisis, forcing more and more young (and not only young) Italians to move back in with their parents, would have a positive effect in producing a strong sense of responsibility in these young people as they depend on their families’ support (Reyneri 2009).

possibilities to engage legal action against illicit temporary employment were reduced by the ‘collegato lavoro’, a law passed in Novembre 2010. Most importantly, illegal flexible labour contracts can now be processed only within a period of 60 days after their expiration ([www.precario.org/collegatolavoro](http://www.precario.org/collegatolavoro)). Moreover, legal disputes on labour issues can now be transferred from the legal authorities to private arbitration bodies (‘collegi arbitrari’). The recompense for lost incomes to be paid by firms in case of illicit cessation of temporary contracts is standardised and limited to a maximum of 12 monthly wages. And, finally, a possibility is introduced to officially certify the regularity of individual labour contracts by a mutual agreement of employee and employer. Like the elasticity and flexibility clauses such ‘voluntary agreement’ constitutes a formalisation of employers’ blackmailing powers at the moment of contract signature.

In sum, opportunities to make employment more flexible were decisively enlarged by all of these legislations since the 1990s. Even the welfare protocol from 2007 for which the Prodi government had promised to review the law from 2003, to re-regulate labour market flexibility and reduce precariousness, does not change this overall direction towards flexibilisation. At best, it tries to contain some of the latter’s excessive negative effects. Meanwhile, any parallel initiatives to extend social and labour protection standards in a comprehensive way to employees with flexible contracts and/or in para-subordinate employment positions have been so far limited to single, fragmented, and partial steps. Aside from the changes concerning pension contributions and cumulated payments for para-subordinate employment through the welfare protocol, a decree from 2000 already rendered insurance against work accidents and professional illnesses obligatory for large parts of the ‘CoCoCo.’ A year later, a law on the principle of non-discrimination expanded protection rights against dismissal and the possibility of maintaining one’s workplace during parental leave periods through part-time workers, and established the right to take parental leave for ‘CoCoCo’ and those involved in ‘socially useful work’ (Frey et al 2002).

*Table 5: Labour market flexibilisation in Italy since 1990*

<b>Tripartite agreement 1993</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Formalisation of Italian labour relations</li> <li>➤ First formal introduction of flexible forms of employment</li> </ul>
<b>Dini reform 1995</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Introduction and formal regulation of para-subordinate employment (Collaborazioni coordinate e continuative)</li> </ul>
<b>Treu-pact 1997</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Important further liberalisation of fixed term contracts</li> <li>➤ Introduction and/or regulation of further forms of flexible employment (training contracts + interim labour + ‘socially useful work’)</li> </ul>
<b>Decree 386 from 2001</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Temporary employment recognised as autonomous contractual typology in case of exceptional needs (technical, productive, organizational necessities, replacement of temporary absent employees)</li> <li>➤ Regulation of fixed term contracts: only once renewable + 3 years total max duration + minimum break ten or twenty days</li> <li>➤ In case of illicit temporary employment: contract transferred into permanent employment</li> </ul>
<b>Legge 30 from 2003 (Biagi law)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Reregulation + introduction of new forms of flexible employment</li> <li>➤ Most importantly: flexibility and elasticity clauses + extension of interim labour + new contract forms (‘job on call’, ‘job sharing’)</li> </ul>
<b>Law on the welfare protocol (law 247/2007)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Reregulation of fixed-term contracts + social security schemes + pension system</li> <li>➤ Most importantly: maximum number of consecutive temporary contracts and break days abolished, instead overall duration limited to 36 months</li> </ul>
<b>Amendment to the decree from 2001</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Further reregulation of fixed term employment: fixed term contracts no longer as exceptional but also in case of regular work tasks + no more transformation of illicit temporary in permanent contracts (instead: monetary compensation)</li> </ul>
<b>Collegato lavoro 2010</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Reregulation of legal action against illegal labour contract:</li> <li>➤ Most importantly: limitation of legal denouncement to 60 days after contract expiration</li> </ul>

#### *4.4 The Italian labour relations system: 'Organised decentralisation' and unions' losing power positions in times of precarisation*

The changes in labour regulations presented above are linked to simultaneous changes in the social relations of hegemony. This section suggests that the development of labour relations in Italy is an important expression of such relations of hegemony, and thus, of the power positions from which re-regulations are enforced or opposed by the different labour relations actors. Examining the history of labour relations is also important to better understand the context of the research question pursued here about collective action potential and their possible enhancement.<sup>103</sup>

The history of labour relations in Italy since the Second World War has seen pronounced shifts between periods with more or less centralisation and decentralisation of collective labour relations, which is typical for this national setting. These shifts, often criticised as a sign of instability, incoherence, and lacking institutionalisation, reflect changes in the historically contingent power relations between labour and capital, as well as in the related strategies of industrial relations actors (unions, employer associations, state).<sup>104</sup> Important with regard to these actors and strategies is the existence of different union confederations which are divided along political lines. The three main national union confederations are CGIL, CISL and UIL<sup>105</sup>. In addition, several federations of autonomous unions exist, such as CUB or Cobas<sup>106</sup>.

While centralised bargaining marked Italian labour relations in the post-war period (first on a inter-confederal, then on a sectoral level), the 1960s and the first half of 1970s witnessed a particularly strong decentralisation. During this phase of strong union power and high shop

---

<sup>103</sup> This overview is necessarily focussed on the industrial sector, as this has been the dominant sector during Fordism with respect to economic development and labour struggles, as well as the selective focal point of labour sociologists' attention. It is relevant for this empirical study of retail labour, as it gives some insight into the specific labour relations system, the historical constellations of hegemony, and the important cultural heritage of workplace conflicts in the Italian context.

<sup>104</sup> For the following historical overview see Regalia 1995; Sablowski 1998; Cuningham 2000; Frey et al. 2002; Regalia/Regini 2002; Wright 2005.

<sup>105</sup> The labour relations system is dominated by these three federations, which each have specific branches for all economic sectors. The biggest federation, CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro), has historically been close to the communist party (Partito Comunista) and defined itself as a unitarian class union. It has traditionally had its stronghold in the industrial workforce. CISL (Confederazione Italiana Sindacati dei Lavoratori) has been linked to the Christian democrats (Democrazia Cristiana). It follows a sectoral, integration focussed logic and particularly organised public services. UIL (Unione Italiana del Lavoro) is the smallest confederation and it is present, above all, within the service sector. Originally, it represents the social-democratic current within Italian unionism and as such emerged as a secession of CGIL. To a lesser extent than the two other federations it equally had ties with political parties, particularly with the socialists (Partito Socialista Italiano) and the social-democrats (Partito Socialista Democratico Italiano), and it follows a more corporatist strategy. All of the here mentioned parties do not exist anymore today and party political cleavages between the confederations have diminished. Nonetheless, differences in their programmatic and strategic orientations remain.

<sup>106</sup> CUB stands for Confederazione Unitaria di Base, and Cobas for Confederazione dei Comitati di Base.



floor mobilisation, unions could profit from and consequently had an interest in sustaining a decentralised system of labour relations. Militant shop floor struggles played a crucial role in the successful enforcement of workers rights during this period. Beyond the shop floor level, the latter translated into an important national law – the ‘workers statute,’ which improved the rights of workers in protecting against dismissal, workplace safety, and union rights. The strength of unions in local struggles produced a stronger codification and formalisation of labour relations, as well as an increased involvement of the state in their regulation. This development occurred in a macro-economic context of rising prosperity initiated with the Italian ‘economic miracle’ of 1959 to 1962.

The second half of the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s were characterised by continuous recentralisation and a return to macroeconomic concertation. From the side of capital, the violent shop floor conflicts of the previous period were confronted with attempts to reframe collective labour relations on a central level. Simultaneously, a massive restructuring of production processes and work organisation started, enhancing the development of the above described system of flexible specialisation. This new production model decisively reduced the number and relevance of so-called Fordist ‘mass-workers’ who represented the main actors in the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s; and it went hand in hand with a loss of union strength both within the firms and on a social level. Regarding the macroeconomic context, in contrast to the former period, recentralisation took place during a phase of economic crisis, high unemployment, and inflation.

Recentralisation has also been favoured by a change in the big union confederations’ strategies. CGIL, CISL, and UIL saw their own power positions at the shop floor at risk due to the growing strength and competition from often corporatist, branch specific, and autonomous unions. Beyond trying to transfer gains and strength from the local struggles to the level of national bargaining procedures and state regulations, the confederations had an endogenous power interest in centralisation: It offered a tool to ensure their role, position, and influence in formalised co-management processes, in contrast to the conflict oriented strategies of shop floor organisation during the 1960s and 1970s. The latter was taken up and maintained by ‘grassroots committees’ (‘Cobas’). These ‘committees’ witnessed a rapid development in the 1980s in protest against the confederations’ strategies fostering concertation, co-management, and wage-restraints.<sup>107</sup>

---

<sup>107</sup> The ‘Cobas’ are the most militant among the autonomous unions in the Italian context, combining particularism, market orientation, and class rhetoric. Besides, ‘classical’ autonomous unions, whose relevance increased during the collective mobilisations in the 1970s, represent rather moderate and egalitarian actors. Finally, less militant ‘professional unions,’ representing interests of specific occupational categories, have a long history in the Italian context, equally regaining importance in the 1980s (Sablowski 1998; Regalia/Regini 2002).

Also the (though still limited) formalisation of work councils within the workers statute initially followed such a (state-supported) logic of ensuring the power of unions against rank and file organisation and struggles. Work councils were now formally defined as dual structures comprised of both workers and union representation, but still maintained largely informal procedures.<sup>108</sup> Once the return to centralised bargaining and macroeconomic concertation had occurred and the majority of work councils had been unionised, unions quickly lost interest in any further strengthening, regulation, and support of work councils. The function of councils largely shifted from conflict catalysers to administrators of internal company day-to-day labour relations – often largely ignored by the external unions (Regalia 1995).

Since the mid-1980s, in a context of growing employers' strength and weakening unions, a new period of decentralised bargaining processes began. This time it, first and foremost, constituted a capital-led attack on collective norms and unions' bargaining power - pushing the deregulation of labour and the erosion of national sectoral collective contracts. In the late 1980s, there was a renewed interest among unions in work councils, in order to increase the unions' visibility. This repeated shift in union strategies was motivated by an attempt to regain control over the shop floor. It developed not least in response to employers' increasing use of participatory management strategies and decentralised labour relations as a tool to gain workers consent to flexibilisation. Consequently, work councils increasingly took over consultative and representative functions with the employer. Unlike the 1970s, decentralisation from the unions side now took place under defensive and co-management oriented premises.<sup>109</sup>

Parallel to this re-decentralisation, there was a renewed rising importance of national concertation politics in the form of tripartite agreements during the 1990s. The unions' simultaneous reorientation towards centralised regulation has to be seen in the context of a relative weakness among the three main union confederations, combined with a political, as well as an economic crisis, and pressures resulting from European single market policies (Maastricht criteria). This situation translated into a hegemonic rhetoric of 'national emergency,' which sustained the need for concertation and national consent and helped to contain and neutralise social conflict potentials as a result. With the crisis of the Italian party

---

<sup>108</sup> This dual structure grants an important role to local, company-related bargaining, and thus, to shop floor actors. External unions still dispose of an advantageous power position within work councils, as candidates for council elections necessarily have to adhere to union lists.

<sup>109</sup> Notwithstanding this overall defensive character, since the 1980s, there have been two revivals of opposing, adversarial labour relations: immediately in the 1980s as a reaction to the failure of concertation strategies and declining unionisation and bargaining strength and during the second Berlusconi government (2001-2006) following its massive attacks on workers' rights (namely regarding the protection against dismissal).

system and the disintegration of the Christian Democrat, as well as the Socialist party in the beginning of the 1990s, the union confederations lost their political orientation points. To them, the return to national concertation offered an opportunity to present themselves as reliable, moderate partners for reform, and thus, regain public and political recognition, as well as strength, in the face of autonomous unions (Sablowski 1998).

This simultaneous striving for decentralisation and formalisation culminated in the famous 1993 tripartite agreement, mentioned above, which established a historically new degree of formalisation of Italian labour relations (while still sticking to the dual character of work councils). For the first time in Italian history, this agreement institutionalised the bipolar character of industrial relations with two bargaining levels: a first level of centralised, national sectoral bargaining and a second level of company-related bargaining. It defined the responsibilities of both bargaining levels – though, in practice, still leaving space for informal adjustments. Finally, it introduced a single pattern of work place representation for all sectors (*‘Rappresentanza sindacale unitaria,’* RSU) (Sablowski 1998; Lenzi 2001; Regalia/Regini 2002).

As a result, a bargaining system of ‘organised decentralisation’ gained relative stability (Traxler 1996). In this, four different modes of second level collective bargaining can be distinguished. For all of these decentralised forms of bargaining, however, the first level of national, sectoral contract is binding and can not be turned down<sup>110</sup>. The first form of decentralised bargaining is characterised by an important influence from ‘external’ unions. Such decentralised in-house bargaining on the single firm level is the standard in the manufacturing industry where it is generally led together with the work councils (RSU), which are mostly dominated by the confederations and the ‘external’ union branches. In the industrial districts and the crafts sector, with its predominantly small firms, bargaining is also still decentralised. But, here it functions on a territorial level and is mainly carried out by only external union representatives, often in absence of strong work council traditions. Second, a different form of decentralised bargaining, with a strong orientation towards concertation and a predominant role of work councils (instead of external unions), takes place in the public services and wherever there are strong autonomous unions. Third, in large corporations and large retail firms the focus lies on centralised second-level bargaining. In this case, national, company-wide negotiations are supervised by the national industry unions. Finally, for many

---

<sup>110</sup> At least this has been the case until a separate agreement was signed in the Fiat plant of Pomigliano in 2010 which undercuts both the valid sectoral and company-wide national collective contracts (see further on in this section).

very small firms, second-level bargaining is excluded or constrained by national agreements (Regalia/Regini 2002).

In terms of current re-regulations of labour market politics, unions appear to have little to oppose with the accelerating liberalisation politics, given their weakened power position since the 1980s. However, during the second Berlusconi government (2001-2006), the confederations (at least for a moment) seemed to be forced into more oppositional strategies. This government openly questioned the principles of concertation and social partnership, which had been at the basis of the tripartite agreements of the 1990s.<sup>111</sup> The turning point for attitudes among unions was probably the government's attempt to reduce protection against dismissal. This provoked a massive central demonstration with three million participants organised by CGIL in Rome on March 23, 2002. It was followed by a general strike in April that was also supported by CISL and UIL. For the first time, the central aim in this struggle was not only to maintain existing regulations for 'standard' guaranteed employment,<sup>112</sup> but to extend them to the whole workforce. Following these massive protests, the reform was abandoned.<sup>113</sup>

In line with such a generalisation of claims, the establishment of distinct sections for precarious and para-subordinate workers within all three main union confederations during the second half of the 1990s reflects a first, though still slow, tentative and not very coherent opening of representational strategies. These are, above all, service-oriented (offering legal support or accounting training, for example) and have so far only restricted influence on the confederations' overall political orientations and strategies: Nidil ('Nuove Identità di

---

<sup>111</sup> The end of concertation policies occurred in a context of rising tensions among the concertation parties about the human cost of further labour market flexibilisation. There was also a growing critique about expropriating parliamentary decision powers through extended trilateral concertation practices, especially the new forms of social dialogue planned by the Berlusconi government. The main employer federation, Confindustria, now clearly supported Berlusconi's policies. The first Berlusconi government (March to December 1994), in contrast, had been more concerned with maintaining unity among various types of employers (small firms with interests in free-market policies, large firms used to public subsidies, and especially the system of 'cassa d'integrazione') and keeping a stable relationship with the unions, making them more reluctant to pursue controversial reforms.

<sup>112</sup> Article 18 of the Italian Labour Statute guarantees rather strong employment protection for all employees with permanent contracts in firms with more than 15 workers, as it binds dismissal to precise conditions regarding the relationship of trust between the employee and employer, and the economic performance of the firm. However, the possibilities for both 'just' disciplinary and economically motivated dismissal remain various. Immediate dismissal, without warning, is possible in cases of serious negligence of contractual obligations by the employee. The definition of such 'serious negligence' is fixed in the collective contract. Smaller breaches or negligence can also lead to dismissal, though not immediately and the employee must be given a chance to change his/her behaviour, such as low productivity and a poor attitude. Regarding the economic situation of the firm, 'just reasons' for dismissal range from a fundamental crisis of the company and the closing of an enterprise down to a reduced need for specific work tasks (in case it is impossible for the worker to be relocated).

<sup>113</sup> For a documentation of these CGIL struggles, see <http://www.lomb.cgil.it/art18/art18.php#lotte> as well as <http://www.lomb.cgil.it/art18/cronistoria.htm>.

Lavoro' or 'New Identities of Labour') was born outside the union and only later federated with CGIL in 1998. It follows a strategy of 'co-promotion' together with company-level representation of 'non-standard' employees. The first work council delegate for Nidil was elected in 2001 at Iveco/Turin. In 2009, CISL federated its two branches for atypical and interim workers (Alai, founded in 1998) and the self-employed (Clacs) into one organisation named FELSA ('Federazione Lavoratori Somministrati Autonomi Atipici' or 'Federation of dependent autonomous atypical workers'). Finally, Cpo ('Coordinamento per l'occupazione' or 'Coordination for employment') developed out of a project of unionisation with which UIL originally tried to address unemployed workers. Both of these organisations' strategy is to achieve individual contracts for non-standard employees and to offer them support and expertise. Attempts to establish collective contracts are undertaken mainly by Nidil in workplaces with a high percentage of precarious employees and nonexistent, or so far disinterested, workers' representation (such as the non-profit sector and in market research) (Lenzi 2001; Ballarino 2002, 2005).

Yet, unlike the protest against the dismissal protection reform, and despite these organisational attempts involving precarious workers, the further legalisation of flexible and precarious forms of employment did not meet any important, effective resistance. The fact is that these processes of flexibilisation and precarisation are largely eroding the formally still existing collective protections, social schemes, and labour rights. This holds true particularly for the 'saved' dismissal protections: In a context where a large and growing share of the workforce works in small scale enterprises and with temporary and/or semi-autonomous contracts, these protections might still be in place. But, they only cover a shrinking fraction of the workforce, specifically those with permanent contracts in enterprises with more than 15 employees.<sup>114</sup> In fact, unions still largely act as stakeholders of this old, permanent workforce.<sup>115</sup> In defence of these stakeholders, they partly support labour market flexibilisation and inferior working conditions for flexible, precarious labour. In addition, unions have an interest in maintaining the fragmented system of exceptional, politically negotiated regulations for employment protection and unemployment schemes, as they can then maintain at least some power positions and relevance in these case-by-case negotiations

---

<sup>114</sup> The rejection of the dismissal protection reform in 2002 might have been a success for the unions, but given the effective changes in the labour market from the perspective of capital, this reform is also less necessary today where easy dismissal is rendered possible in other ways.

<sup>115</sup> According to data from 2008, there are about 12.3 million union members among the confederations CGIL (5.7 million), CISL (4.5 million), and UIL (2.1 million). Of these, 6.2 million are active workers, 5.7 million pensioners, and only 0.4 million unemployed (Cirioli 2010). The mobilisation for the protest against the dismissal protection reform was largely based on the activation of pensioners, not surprising, given that it was this generation, which fought for the labour statute and the article 18 in the 1970s.

(namely in cases of short-time allowances). With this backdrop, a symptomatic, important limit in union politics towards precarious workers is the externalisation of their affairs to separate bodies, instead of a transversal organisation within the existing sector branches and a respective recognition of precarisation as a main concern on all political levels.

Given this situation the 2003 labour market reform, which was passed by the second Berlusconi government (legge Biaggi), met with some criticism among the union confederations only from CGIL. CISL and UIL, instead, largely agreed on the necessity to liberalise labour markets in order to enhance employment and to come to a concerted agreement. During the following centre-left coalition government under Prodi (in office from May 2006 to May 2008), the three main confederations largely refrained from controversial strategies against the ‘friendly’ government. The welfare protocol remained behind this government’s promises to review labour market flexibilisation, abolish at least part of the flexible employment forms introduced by the law 30 in 2003, and to introduce consistent social security schemes for the precarious workforce. Yet, in the face of protests in the streets (such as a national manifestation in October 2007), the confederations only sought to obtain better reforms, but refrained from any sharp criticism and rejection of the government.

Under the current, third Berlusconi government, the unions, as well as the entire Italian left, have become more and more marginalised (Reyneri 2009a; Sciortino 2008). The institutional left is in a state of absolute decline and fragmentation and is embroiled in internal disputes after the fall of the Prodi government in 2008 and the loss of the following elections. More than ever, the union confederations appear to be dedicated to adapting to the new conditions. To give merely one example, the last congress of the CGIL, the traditionally most contentious confederation, attempted to re-establish unifying policies with CISL and UIL and align itself to the latter’s politics of rigorous moderation. Simultaneously, a recentralisation and more authoritarian internal organisation took place within CGIL. The more radical union branch for the metal industry, FIOM, as well as the left-wing ‘minoritarian motion’ are more and more marginalised (Cremaschi 2010).

Below the level of state regulations, also with regard to collective bargaining<sup>116</sup> a similar picture of current and increasing union weakness and moderation prevails - though some single concrete measures to contain precariousness of flexible employment have been realised

---

<sup>116</sup> The specific situation of flexibility regulations at the company level and by collective bargaining in the retail sector are addressed in chapter six, when the empirical research is presented.

in the specific cases of public employment, interim labour and project work. (Frey et al 2002). Concerning flexibilisation, national bargaining during the second half of the 1990s was, above all, concerned with the flexibilisation of more traditional forms of 'non-standard' employment with part-time and training contracts. Mostly, this seems to have favoured firm interests. In certain cases, as for ministerial employees, some measures were introduced to regulate the integrative elements of retributions for 'non-standard' employees as already prescribed by legislation, such as the continuation of payments (in case of illness), paid holidays, and fringe benefits. In 1998, the first national collective contract was signed for interim work. It limits the amount of temporary workers allowed in proportion to the total staff of a firm and excludes interim work for certain extremely low paid and qualified professions, as well as work places in contact with chemical substances. On the company level, bargaining focussed on putting the extension of interim work into practice. In the case of Lombardia, some further regulations for non-standard employment were obtained in certain public institutions. These concerned the minimum and maximum duration of 'CoCoCo' (three months to one year), the obligation of a written contract for this kind of employment, and information and services for non-standard employees to be provided by the public administrations (Frey et al 2002).

Regarding the current period, however, unions more and more appear to have lost the necessary strength and power even for such fragmented single regulations also on the level of collective bargaining. The recent case of the Fiat plant in Pomigliano is illuminating in this respect. In this south Italian plant, traditionally considered the less productive among all Fiat plants in Italy, the management in 2010 first threatened to close down production and then proposed instead to re-transfer production of the new Fiat-Panda from Poland back to Pomigliano, maintaining employment in that region. But, on the condition of signing an agreement with the unions, which stipulates specific, lower labour conditions for this plant. This agreement neither respects the company-wide national collective contract with Fiat, nor the national contract for the metal industry. In part, it is even unconstitutional. For example, strike action, which in Italy is a constitutional right, was forbidden according to the proposed document. The management wanted free arbitrary power to discipline (and dismiss) workers, shop stewards, and unions in case they create and engage in any workplace conflict. As far as working conditions are concerned, the main difference from the collective contract was a further flexibilisation and extension of work times. There would be an increased number of 18 shifts, also including Saturday nights, not to be collectively negotiated overtime hours (which can be directly ordered by management) would rise from 40 to 120 per worker and year, break times would be reduced from 40 to 30 minutes, lunch breaks relocated to the end of the shift,

and - ignoring legislation on the matter - rest time between two shifts would be reduced below the legal limit of eleven hours (infoaut 2010a).

Beyond this downgrading of work conditions, a further aim behind this authoritarian blackmailing operation ('you sign the separate contract or we close the plant' and 'with the current global economic crisis nothing else is possible') from the side of the Fiat management seems to have been destroying what is left of the industrial relations system and the unions' bargaining power, and to achieve a complete individualisation of labour contracts (Sciortino 2010). While the local union delegates of CISL and UIL readily signed the contract, CGIL delegates refused and, in a union referendum, a large part (though a minority) of the local workforce also rejected the new contract.<sup>117</sup> However, all union confederations (CGIL included), as well as most political parties, lobbied in its favour - the national CGIL in a more hidden way, by refraining from any support with the local workers and delegates. In December 2010 a very similar contract was established for a second Fiat plant, Mirafiori in Turin, again in a separate agreement only with CISL and UIL. In this, there practically has been no negotiation at all, as the contract terms were nearly completely set by the Fiat management and simply accepted by UIL and CISL. Simultaneously, Fiat left the employers' association Confindustria in order not to be bound to the national collective contract any longer. What first was labelled as an exception for one specific plant, thus, rapidly turns out as a general attack against unitarian, centralised national collective bargaining and as an attempt to establish a new, authoritarian model of industrial relations (infoaut 2010d, 2010e).

In conclusion, current conditions to enhance collective action potential and employees' collective disposal over their flexibilised work conditions appear to be difficult at the level of the existing, institutional industrial relations system and collective bargaining. The historical overview presented here demonstrates how the strength of different actors, conflict levels, and the resulting structure of labour relations mutually influence each other. These linkages are far from linear or mono causal. Instead, they are highly bound to specific historical context conditions, including changing strategies and heterogeneous positions between different class fractions. Beyond these multifaceted power relations and strategies, present labour market liberalisations clearly reflect neoliberal hegemony: They are created not only from a position of strength of capital interests and a respective union weakness, but are also due to the lacking offensive and strategically limited positions among unions, as well as their moderation and

---

<sup>117</sup> More than 35% of all employees voted no and 62% voted yes. Among the shop floor workers, excluding office workers and management, the 'no' even reached a majority of more than 50% (infoaut 2010c).



concertation practices – a concertation which has been abandoned by policies of the state and employers.<sup>118</sup>

In consequence, an inquiry into the potential enhancement of collective capacities of labour must pay specific attention to the shop floor level of collective agency, daily struggles, and solidarity in order to detect possible perspectives to redevelop organisational strength and conflict capacities from the grassroots. The post-war history of Italian labour relations has shown that periods of union strength, in fact, coincide with strong organising and mobilisation at the shop floor. While this is no automatism (and further, historical factors matter this strength), such mobilisation can be considered an important basis for regaining effective power positions in front of employers' association and state politics alike, and for engaging in concrete struggles and more confrontational strategies instead of the current defensive concertation practices.

---

<sup>118</sup> The historical overview presented here focussed on the unions' positions and strategies and, thus, only on one labour relations actor. The role of employer associations was only considered to a very limited extent. This is justified by the primary interest in the collective labour action potential of labour.

*Table 6: Post-war development of Italian labour relations*

	<b>Bargaining levels and unions' strategies</b>	<b>Unions' power positions and socio-economic context conditions</b>
<b>1950s</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Centralised bargaining</li> <li>➤ Unitarian, national concertation politics</li> </ul>	
<b>1960s and 1970s</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Strong decentralisation</li> <li>➤ High shop floor mobilisation and conflictive bargaining</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Phase of strong union power</li> <li>➤ Rising economic prosperity ('economic miracle' 1959-1962)</li> </ul>
<b>Late 1970s and first half of 1980s</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Recentralisation and return to macroeconomic concertation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Phase of weakening union power</li> <li>➤ Economic crisis, high unemployment, and inflation</li> <li>➤ Beginning of massive restructuring of production processes and work organisation</li> <li>➤ Growth of 'grassroots committees' in protest against the confederations</li> </ul>
<b>Second half of 1980s and 1990s</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Reinforced concertation strategies both on central and decentral level</li> <li>➤ Formalisation of labour relations ("organised decentralisation")</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Defensive union positions in face of capital-lead attack against labour standards</li> <li>➤ Political and economic crisis, pressures from European single market policies</li> </ul>
<b>2000s</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Further moderation as unitarian trend</li> <li>➤ Erosion of bargaining power, co-management capacities and collective contracts</li> <li>➤ Introduction of separate union bodies for precarious workers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Growing marginalisation of political left and unions alike</li> <li>➤ Continuous economic crisis</li> </ul>

#### ***4.5 Social movements and precarisation: Intelligence Precaria and the Punto San Precario***

Recognising this relevance of the shop floor level for the development of collective action potentials is a task not only for research, but also for practical interventions. With respect to the latter, Milan offers a particular context. Beyond the institutionalised labour relations system, strong social movement initiatives around the issue of precarisation exist in this town. As relevant, innovative collective actors in the field of precarious labour these social movement initiatives will be briefly introduced here. They are of particular interest here as they aim at enhancing collective organising and conflict at the shop floor.

The driving force is the network of Intelligence Precaria which has brought the issue of precarisation to the fore of public debate. Among others, this network organises the Mayday Parades. These Mayday Parades are probably the most visible manifestation of struggles around the issue of precarisation in the city of Milan and beyond. They are an attempt to re-politicise the Labour Day, May 1, and to constitute a means of expression for precarious workers and to invent new forms of collective agency and struggle. Rather than as classical demonstrations, they take the form of street parades, with decorated wagons, costumes, and music. The first Mayday Parade took place in Milan in 2001. In 2004, it spread to Barcelona and from 2005 it has been organised in several European cities and even in Tokyo. In Milan, 50.000 to 100.000 people participate each year in the Mayday Parade ([www.precaria.org](http://www.precaria.org) and [www.chainworkers.org](http://www.chainworkers.org), [www.euromayday.org](http://www.euromayday.org)).

The Mayday movement comprises workers' collectives, grassroots unions like CUB<sup>119</sup>, social centres, leftist, and autonomous groups, as well as collectives of ravers, musicians and artists. Originally, it was initiated by a leftist collective from one of Milan's autonomous social centres called Chainworkers. Today, this collective has transformed into the wider network of Intelligence Precaria (from here on also referred to as IP). Within and besides this network, a variety of linked projects exists - the Punto San Precario (a support point for precarious workers), the website of Intelligence Precaria (as a tool for collective conspiring, sharing of knowledge and information about struggles against precarisation and employers' 'bad practices': [www.precaria.org](http://www.precaria.org)), the collective of Serpica Naro (a self-organisation of precarious fashion workers: [www.serpicanaro.com](http://www.serpicanaro.com)), BIOS (the attempt to create a union for precarious workers), etc. These projects are frequented and passed by various people, political

---

<sup>119</sup> CUB stands for Confederazione Unitaria di Base, Unitarian Confederation of grassroots unions.

activists and precarious workers alike, who are mostly involved in the service sector (from fashion to theatre, from call centres to social services, from retailing to academic research, etc...).

Producing and supporting concrete struggles at precarious work places is at the centre of IP's attention. One of the first fields of intervention were retail workplaces, with picketing and flashmobs at supermarkets to scandalise precarious employment and work conditions. Simultaneously, the figure of San Precario<sup>120</sup>, the saint and protector of all precarious people, was invented - and given a public birth in several actions. For example, he 'appeared' in a Milanese supermarket, encouraging workers to rebel against experienced precarisation. (<http://www.chainworkers.org/node/295/play>).

Beyond such single public actions, the Punto San Precario has been created as a permanent support structure for precarious employees. It consists of a collective space where precarious employees (everybody who considers themselves as such) can meet, exchange their experiences, and develop conflict strategies. The Punto offers legal and practical action support for any work-related problems. The idea is to stimulate and give employees the necessary resources to enter into open conflict with their employers. With this support, several legal actions against illicit temporary contracts, dismissals and outsourcing were won in recent years (Cunningham 2000; Armano/Sciortino 2005; chainworkers 2006, 2006a; [www.precaria.org](http://www.precaria.org); [www.euromayday.org](http://www.euromayday.org)).<sup>121</sup>

However, such legal actions are only one part of the overall strategy, though a privileged starting point. Crucially, they are projected as a collective endeavour, a process of collective aggregation and a place for struggle also beyond the courtroom. For this purpose, beyond concrete legal expertise and advocacy, special stress is put on networking, mutual support and the attempt to stimulate collective trials. Yet, through this networking, even individual trials are framed as collective processes. A crucial element in this is the sharing of "skills for action". Concretely, this might comprise help for writing flyers and organising press conferences, support with picketing and flashmobs in front or inside the workplace, or

---

<sup>120</sup> See [www.chainworkers.org/SANPRECARIO/index.html](http://www.chainworkers.org/SANPRECARIO/index.html)

<sup>121</sup> The most spectacular was the case of 17 hostesses based at the Malpensa airport. They had all worked for more than five years with various temporary contracts for the Sea Holding company before these contracts were no longer renewed. Sea Holding manages the ground floor activities at Milan's biggest airport. Following the labour court sentence in Busto Arsizio on March 13, 2006, eight hostesses had to be re-hired on a permanent basis and nine who had found another job in the meantime had to be reimbursed. The sentence was based on the decreto 386/2001, which defines the legal reasons for temporary employment and allows for exceptions from this rule for the airport business (and other sectors with seasonal peaks). It fixes a maximum duration for yearly fixed-term employment per summer and winter season (six months between April and October, and four months between November and March). This limit had not been respected by Sea Holding for years. Well beyond this case, legislation regarding temporary contracts is often violated by Italian employers and not enforced. This is one of the issues the 'Punto San Precario' focusses its activities on (chainworkers 2006, 2006a).

enhancing knowledge and understanding of a company's strategies, developing strategies to attack the corporate image and culture by means of public campaigns, subvertising, etc. The latter strategy is a double one, pointing at both the external public and the internal workforce, or opposing companies' external publicity as well as the internal management strategies of participation, loyalty enhancement and normative control. The goal of these wider activities is to back-up employees' negotiation position in the courtroom and at the workplace with the necessary demonstration of strength, to put companies under pressure, and to open a space for collective experiences and acquisition of concrete struggle capacities that could prevail after an individual legal action.

On the theoretical grounds, the starting point for IP's collective interventions, and also for the Punto San Precario, is the understanding of precarisation as a question of cultural hegemony. In IP's words: Current precarisation reflects the strength of business, but it does not constitute the reason or origin for this strength.<sup>122</sup> Precarity is interpreted by IP as a new model of social, economic and territorial organisation of the society - a new model which produces atomisation and fragmentation, offers new margins for enhanced exploitation, and renders old forms of collective aggregation and conflict against such exploitation inefficient. But, in order to realise these social transformations, strength and power are needed. What is behind this strength of business, in IP's analysis, is not only its coercive power to obtain employees' forced submission by means of rising direct pressures at the workplaces and within society - pressures produced by precarious work and employment conditions, workfare politics, social fragmentation, and consequently growing vulnerability. Instead, business' strength crucially relies on its capacity to produce consent (and thus voluntary participation) by controlling the production of cultural imaginaries and identities. In Post-Fordist society, these cultural imaginaries and identities are dominated by consumption-oriented, marked-shaped social relations and corporate identity formation. In other words, the hegemonic cultural patterns set the company (its corporate identity, its branding strategies and its market-shaped social relations) as a model not only for economic but also social organisation.<sup>123</sup>

---

<sup>122</sup> The following argumentation refers to a reader that was circulated within the network for a seminar in 2006 and combines a variety of the so far written texts of the collective (chainworkers 2006b). Of particular interest here are two texts from this reader: "I media sociali, il software libero e la macchina morbida" and "Comunicazione applicata e precarietà sociale". Moreover, the presentation relies on more recent texts and mails from the mailing list of Intelligence Precaria, preparing and evaluating a series of workshops held in June and July 2010.

<sup>123</sup> According to IP, the point in this is not so much to predetermine specific identities, but to control the social processes of their production - the ways in which images and identities are realised, developed, and expressed by the subjects in their daily life, their practices and interactions. Therefore, under the specific conditions of Post-Fordism, businesses strength is seen to lie in the capacity to impose itself not only as an economic form but

This argument of cultural hegemony is of particular interest with respect to the question of collective action potentials, because it places the necessity, but also the possibility, to struggle against precarisation and to produce conflict and conflict capacities at the top of the agenda. As a question of cultural hegemony, in fact, precarisation is seen as the outcome of concrete interest struggles, and specific, changeable political and social power positions. What could appear as a vicious circle is thus taken by IP as an argument and starting point for developing concrete practices and strategies to oppose business' hegemony: If capital's current power and capacity to precarise and downscale work conditions relies on its cultural hegemony, and this hegemony is again sustained by the social atomisation which precarisation generates - then, in order to oppose precarisation, it is first and foremost necessary (but also possible) (a) to reappropriate autonomous capacities of producing cultural imaginaries, and (b) to strengthen labour's power position through new forms of collective aggregation and conflict, which take account of the specific conditions of precarious labour.

In clear contrast to the described union strategies of particularistic interest defence, defensive co-management and adaptation, and internal recentralisation, IP's strategy to do so is to produce open conflict, trying to foster collective experiences, to develop collective capacities and shop floor organising by means of concrete workplace struggles. The Punto San Precario is one central element in this strategy. Three aspects of its work and functioning are particularly important with respect to the question of cultural hegemony and the fostering of conflict capacities in times of precarisation.

The first regards the strategy of the PSP to reappropriate collective resources and capacities by means of collective legal actions. This means reappropriating collective labour rights that are under pressure on the shop floor as power resources in daily struggles against precarisation. Yet, legal actions can be used as power resources only where experienced problems are covered by existing legal norms - and where actual precarising proceedings violate these norms. This is far from embracing all aspects of precarisation and all kinds of precarious employees. Instead, the erosion and/or cancellation of Fordist labour standards is

---

as a model for social practices and social relations. As such, the main process of producing imaginaries and identities in this Post-Fordist context takes place through consumption and corporate branding on the one hand, and corporate identity formation at the workplace on the other. One emblematic example used to explain this process are shopping centres: Well beyond their function of selling goods, shopping centres are social places where lifestyles and social relations are sold, and where culture and suggestions are produced. Within this cultural and social reference frame of the company as a social model, of marked-shaped social relations, of consumption, branding and corporate culture, precarious people are actively enacting current processes of social restructuring and precarisation. They themselves produce and reproduce its necessary conditions of existence, the cultural images and identities that it is build on - as social actors in marked-shaped social relations, as brand-devoted consumers, as well as company-committed, more or less creative, self-responsible, competitive precarious workers.

part and parcel of current process of precarisation, both on the shop floor level by means of management's blackmailing pressures, and with respect to the neoliberal reregulation of labour and social politics. In this situation, it appears as all the more crucial to enforce formally existing collective regulations by court trials. Since a labour right serves only where it is actually put into practice and its violation is sanctioned. Yet, legal action can be only one element in struggles against precarisation. It needs to be combined with political strategies for new, encompassing social security schemes that are accessible also for precarious workers with their specific needs. Or, in other words, with a struggle for the enforcement, modernisation and extension labour and social rights that are apt to face and stop current processes of precarisation. There is definitely not the space here to enter into this discussion in any more detail. But, it is important to mention that, in this respect, Intelligence Precaria connects its activities at the Punto San Precario with a political campaign for an unconditional basic income.<sup>124</sup> Simultaneously, the central aim of the PSP is not simply to increase workers' knowledge about their rights, but to enhance consciousness and experiences of own strength in fighting for such rights and own interests. Legal action, in this, is only a tactical choice of one possible conflict arena where, for certain issues, employers can be successfully opposed. Second, especially relevant as a response to precarisation is the functioning of the PSP as an external support structure. In fact, one central aim in the constitution of the PSP is to take account of the specific vulnerability of precarious employees and the fears generated by management's blackmailing powers and anti-union pressures. Offering an external collective space outside the workplace is a way to counter the (practical and psychological) marginalisation which precarious collective activists experience within their workplaces. It enables finding allies, socialising, collective organising, and solidarity within a wider network. Support from such a wider network enhances the public visibility of struggles beyond the single workplace. It makes it possible to distribute the struggle on more shoulders and to practice a tactical division of labour. All this is important to offer more security to precarious employees in their confrontation with the firm and to better protect them from work-related sanctions (such as dismissal). For example, the preparation of activities can take place outside the workplace and is less visible to management. Or, especially exposed tasks (such as picketing) can be carried out by people not working in the concerned place. Third, the PSP is conceived as not only as a space for concrete, material collective aggregation and agency, but also as a tool for the development of new collective imaginaries and self-representations. As such, it is meant to offer alternative ways of thinking, of identity

---

<sup>124</sup> For more information see [www.precaria.org](http://www.precaria.org) and [www.bin-italia.org](http://www.bin-italia.org)

formation, self-positioning and social relation, in opposition to the cultural hegemony of business and the resulting fragmentation, individualisation and marketisation of social relations.<sup>125</sup> In fact, the relevance of cultural hegemony for IP implies rethinking the idea of conflict: The production of alternative cultural images and social relations is seen as a new, central terrain of conflict.

What is at stake for the PSP at this level of intervention are two things. First, the possibility of experiencing and expressing daily lived precarisation as a collective situation, a social relation and a conflictive process - and not as something marginal, individual and/or economically necessary. Second, the affirmation of employees' conflict capacities and struggle necessities. Producing new cultural images and self-representations, thus, is meant to counter the idea of precarious workers as passive victims of flexibilisation, and to buffer the daily experienced pressures of blackmailing, marginalisation, and fears through a collective self-positioning. In addition, it aims at enhancing conflict consciousness, not least by opposing the company's attempts of corporate identity formation, integration and normative control.

#### ***4.6 Conclusion: Selecting Milanese large scale retailing as a research field***

Having presented important aspects related to large scale retailing in Milan in the context of Italian labour market regulations and labour relations, it is now possible to explain why this area was chosen as a focus for inquiring into employees' coping practices in the face of flexibilisation, precarisation, and subjectification of labour, and into their individual and collective action potential.

First, retailing promises to be an interesting case for analysing transformations in labour control. Following the management's simultaneous strategies of cost-reduction and customer orientation resulting from the frontline service character of retail labour, it allows for an analysis of processes of subjectification within an overall Neo-Taylorist, rationalisation focussed work organisation. This points to the question of how management strategies of indirect control, decentralisation, participation, and corporate identity formation interact with

---

<sup>125</sup> In opposition to this cultural hegemony of business, IP has developed the concept of 'social media'. These are understood as tools by which alternative self-representations, alternative cultural imaginaries and social relations, and new forms of collective struggle can be created and experimented. The idea is to combine the collective production and reappropriation of knowledge and information about the world with a process of collective aggregation and organising. Also the Punto San Precario is conceived as such a social media. Other examples are the Mayday Parades and the figure of San Precario (see chapter 4.5), the creative commons licence of "Serpica Naro" (invented by a collective of precarious fashion workers; see [www.serpicanaro.com](http://www.serpicanaro.com)), or the project of "City of Gods". The latter is an imitation of a really existing free press journal which, in its fake version, publishes workers' stories about precarisation.



enhanced forms of direct control and hierarchical supervision, as well as with processes of precarisation, and how these challenges impact a generally low qualified workforce.

Second, Milanese large scale retail can be considered as an extreme case regarding flexibilisation pressures, thus, likely generating equally strong experiences of precarisation among employees. This extreme position is due to the strong flexibility requirements within the retail industry, which is enhanced by the recent liberalisation of both retail and labour markets in Italy. This is further underpinned by the role of Milan as being in the forefront of retail modernisation with a strong development of large scale structures and competition. Additionally, the limited scope of Italian welfare institutions can be expected to generate further precarisation pressures.

Third, regarding the specific Italian context, labour relations and politics in Italy and especially in Milan are particularly interesting in terms of the possibilities for collective agency on the issues of flexibilisation and precarisation. Italy's distinctly bipolar system of labour relations, which places importance on the local level and company-based bargaining, is of interest here. Hence, re-regulation of work conditions and flexibility might be more closely bound to specific local situations, conflicts, and not least to the employees' daily experiences and struggles. Additionally, flexibilisation falls into a period of re-organisation and formalisation of collective labour relations, and likely constituting a push factor for their transformation.

Together with France and Spain, Italy represents one of the European countries where discourses and struggles around precarisation are most developed among social movements and unions. On both levels, Milan is at the forefront: Regarding the expansion of union activities to non-standard employees, the region of Lombardy is the place of many first experiments. Nidil, as well as Alai and Cpo, took their first steps in this region. Such attempts for new forms of representation concern the development of territorial bargaining, or of strategies of firm-level bargaining pointing not so much at the extension of guarantees, but at the strengthening of professionalism and 'entrepreneurship' (Ballarino 2002). Moreover also social movement initiatives on the issue of precarisation are particularly developed in this metropolitan context, as the activities of Intelligence Precaria, the Mayday Parades and the Punto San Precario demonstrate.

This relatively strong development of collective initiatives and discourses on flexibilisation and precarisation is relevant to this research inquiry on collective action potential, and even more so for the prospects of their actual enhancement. They indicate the presence of actors that might foster and carry out collective interventions and innovations. Moreover, the

existence of these collective actors and the relative visibility of the topic of precarisation in social discourses might also enhance employees' sensibility for collective agency options - together with the specific Italian history and cultural heritage of collective workplace struggles.

## PART THREE: EMPIRICS

### 5. Empirical approach

This chapter presents the sample and methods used for the data collection and analysis. The material consists of interviews conducted with retail employees, shop stewards, and external union officers. The chapter describes the channels of field access, the different phases of interviewing and the characteristics of considered companies and employees. Moreover, the method of problem-centred interviewing is introduced and the choice of an ideologically critical discourse analytical approach is explained. This methodological overview does not offer an extended, abstract epistemological reasoning. Instead, the discussion concentrates on the practical strategy and process of interviewing and conducting the analysis, as well as the concrete categories used for the latter.

#### *5.1 Data sources, interview access, and sample structure*

The empirical research process for this study included two phases: A first round of background interviews was completed with union officers and shop stewards involved in large scale retailing in the city of Milan.<sup>126</sup> The aim of these preliminary interviews was to establish an overview over the sector's development in terms of employment structures, work organisation, labour control, collective bargaining, and labour relations. A second round of interviews was then conducted with retail employees from four different companies. These employee interviews constitute the core of the research, as they address employees' daily experiences of the work conditions, employment conditions and labour processes, of flexibility requirements, direct and indirect labour control.

All interviews were done between February and October 2006. The interview language was Italian. This means that all quotations from the interviews that are introduced in the following have been translated by the author. Aside from interviewing, collective contracts, company journals, union communications and leaflets served as additional sources for gathering background information. Some secondary statistical data was included into the background

---

<sup>126</sup> These interviews are deliberately referred to as background interviews and not as expert interviews. Employees are considered as much as experts as union representatives. Their expertise simply covers different issues - micro realities and everyday experiences at particular workplaces on the one hand, background information about a broad overview of the sector on the other. Therefore, no hierarchical order should be introduced between these two types of interviews and informations.

picture as well, namely information from the economic census done by ISTAT, the Italian national statistics service, and data from the Milanese Labour Market Observatory.

An overview is now given for the two interview phases. In this, strategies and problems of field access are addressed and an initial insight into the sample structure is offered. A more detailed analysis of case differences regarding management strategies of flexibilisation and labour control is however presented only in chapter six, as this is already part of the empirical study itself.

Background interviews took place with four union secretaries of the regional service branches from all three of the main confederations: CGIL-FILCAMS Lombardia (1), CISL-FISASCAT Lombardia (2), and UIL-TUCS Lombardia (1).<sup>127</sup> Moreover, 21 shop stewards (17 CGIL, 1 CISL, 3 UIL) from 17 single outlet points from eleven different large scale retail companies situated in the province of Milan were interviewed.<sup>128</sup> These are mostly companies from the two largest retail branches in this context: non-specialised, food-dominated retailing (six super- and hypermarket companies: firms A, C, Cp, E, G, M) and textile retailing (three companies: firms Cn, R, Z). But they also cover specialised large scale retailing, which is considered as a growing branch, with two firms from the furniture (firm I) and sports (firm D) branches. All of these companies are large scale retailers. They either cover single shops with a large surface (R), a network of lots of single, also smaller shops (E, G), or a network of various large scale outlets (A, C, Cn, D, M, Z).

*Table 7: Background interviews per retail branch and firm structure*

<b>RETAIL BRANCH</b>	<b>Super- and hypermarkets</b>	<b>Textile retailing</b>	<b>Other specialised retailing</b>
	A, C, Cp, E, G, M	Cn, R, Z	I, D

<sup>127</sup> FILCAMS is the service branches of the CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro), the federation of Italian Workers in Trade, Tourism and Services, or Federazione Italiana Lavoratori Commercio, Turismo e Servizi. FISASCAT, the respective organisation from CISL (Confederazione Italiana Sindacati dei Lavoratori), is called Italian Union Federation of Employees in Services, Trade-related sectors and Tourism (Federazione Italiana Sindacati Addetti Servizi Commerciali Affini Turismo). UILTUCS, finally, means Italian Union of Workers in Tourism, Trade and Services (Unione Italiana Lavoratori Turismo Commercio e Servizi) and is part of UIL (Unione Italiana del Lavoro).

<sup>128</sup> Secretaries and shop stewards from autonomous unions were not taken into consideration as they play only a very limited role in this sector. Among the eleven companies considered for background interviews there are also the four firms (C, D, G, I) in which the more detailed case studies and the employee interviews were carried out.

<b>FIRM STRUCTURE</b>	<b>single large scale shops</b>	<b>network of lots of single outlet points</b>	<b>network of large scale outlets</b>
	R	Cp, E, G	A, C, Cn, D, I, M, Z

Unfortunately, it was not possible to gain access to the management of retail firms for further information from the companies' point of view. As to be expected, companies proved extremely unwilling to reveal any facts about their employment strategies, work organisation, and work conditions. In some cases, employees were forbidden to talk to anybody about their work conditions and even had to sign a statement together with their contract, guaranteeing confidentiality about such issues.

Regarding the employee interviews, it was rather difficult to find employees willing to participate. Not only did the mentioned 'privacy' rules make contacts difficult. Also in shops without such rules, employees were strongly afraid of talking about their work, as they expected negative repercussions in case superiors and management ever did find out about it. Fear was the strongest among temporary staff, as the most vulnerable employee group, but this was an issue among the permanent work force as well. This already gives a first impression about the pressures all employees are exposed to in their daily work life, and about their own perceptions of their labour position as precarious and vulnerable to any such pressures and negative repercussions in case of the slightest disregard of firm rules and expected corporate identity.

Obviously, in such a situation contacts could not be established through management - apart from the latter's unavailability. Instead, access was gained through unions and shop stewards. Even through these channels, finding interview partners proved to be difficult. As is evident from the interviews, this is due to anti-union pressures exercised in most firms from management's side. Often, any recourse to and contact with shop stewards is banned by management as a sign of disloyal anti-firm behaviour violating corporate identity.<sup>129</sup>

Eventually, 19 employee interviews were carried out in four Milanese large scale retail companies (firms C, D, G, and I).<sup>130</sup> These interviews cover a wide range of employment

---

<sup>129</sup> Analysis will have to take into account that such a union-based access strategy might have favoured contacts with those employees more associated with collective thinking and those who hold a less fearful attitude towards their work conditions and employment relations. Results will show that even under these conditions overall fear still results as high and active collective attitudes as limited.

<sup>130</sup> In appendix 1 a list of all interviewed employees can be found, indicating their employment status, professional role, union affiliation, age, education and living situation. To render the interviews anonymous, all names used are invented.

contracts and retail professions at the shop floor: They include eight cashiers, seven sales clerks, three stock operators, and one promoter. A majority of fourteen interviewees hold permanent contracts, while five have temporary employment positions (comprising also one agency worker). All the permanent workers passed through a phase of temporary employment before reaching this status. Four of them work full-time, all other fifteen interview do part-time hours. Such a broad sampling was a deliberate choice. Taking into account different types of employment allowed for a wide perspective on experiences of flexibilisation, subjectification and precarisation. In this way, the great variety of such experiences, their differences as well as common traits, could be investigated as they occur across and within different employee groups. Any dualist approach that opposes so-called 'a-typical' to 'standard' employment was thus avoided already by the sample composition.

Comparing the sample structure to overall employment in Milanese and/or Italian retailing, 5 out of 19 interviewees with temporary contracts still represent a relatively large share (26%) compared to the estimated average of 10-15% of temporary employment in Milanese large scale retailing in 2006 (own data/background interviews).<sup>131</sup> In addition, all of the interviewed fourteen permanent employees passed through an initial phase of temporary employment within the same firm. As to part-time labour, it accounts for 79% in the sample, against approximately 60% in Milanese large scale retailing in 2006 (own data/background interviews). That is, part-time employment appears as slightly overrepresented among the interviewees. However, these numbers are still lower than the respective national share of 89% for retail employment at the 4<sup>th</sup> qualification level<sup>132</sup>, in the specific case of organised large scale retailing<sup>133</sup>. These numbers have been estimated by Frey and Montanino for 1993 (Frey/Montanino 1995: 89). Such 4<sup>th</sup> level employment concerns all but one employee in this sample, with the outlier being employed at the lower 5<sup>th</sup> level. This predominant use of low qualification levels is in line with the sector's trend to reduce workforce qualification and opportunities for professional growth on the internal labour market, which has been unanimously stressed by Milanese union representatives.

Regarding the gender composition, eleven interview partners are men and eight women. Two age groups have been differentiated, which proved as significant in the analysis of employees'

---

<sup>131</sup> For a more detailed analysis of current employment structures in Milanese retailing see chapter six - as this is part of the empirical investigation itself.

<sup>132</sup> Qualification levels range from one to five, with one being the highest. These qualification levels determine official work tasks and pay. 4<sup>th</sup> level employment in retailing pertains to the work of general sales clerks, cashiers and stock operators. More specialised service activities, such as work at the fresh food desks in the supermarkets, would have to be placed at the 3<sup>rd</sup> qualification level. But, as the employee interviews will show, such more qualified tasks are more and more assigned to staff with a 4<sup>th</sup> level payment only.

<sup>133</sup> Organised large scale retailing refers to specialised, non alimentary shops within a company chain.

work experiences: Eleven employees were under 30 years and eight aged between 30 and 45 years. No contacts could be established to older employees. Differences in living conditions have been taken into account, as they are considered important for experiences of flexibility requirements and precarisation: Five interviewees still live with their parents, four alone, five with a partner, and three with a partner and children (two without responding). Educational backgrounds are equally diverse with a prevalence of high school and university degrees: Five interviewees hold lower secondary school or some professional training degrees, eight have or are completing a high school degree (one is still a student), and three are academics (two students, one master degree). Three interviewees did not specify their educational background. As for their union affiliation, eight interviewees are members of CGIL, two of UIL and nine without membership. This represents a high share of unionised employees. It reflects the fact that 3 out of the 4 companies chosen for the employee interviews are traditional union strongholds.

As to gender, the majority of male employees in the sample gives only a partial impression of actual workforce composition. As in other sectors and countries, the majority of flexible and/or part-time employees in Milanese large retailing are women and young people. Women's high share is not surprising given the gendered segregation and segmentation of labour markets, which leads to a concentration of the female work force in formally low qualified professions, in low hierarchical positions, and in precarious, low paid employment conditions. Nonetheless, women's share in retail employment is lowest in Italy as compared to the EU 27 (51% against 62%, data from Eurostat, Labour Force Survey 2005). This is due to the equally low overall female employment rate in this country (45% against 56% in EU-27 average in 2005; see Eurostat 2005), as well as to the sector's late modernisation, maintaining a relatively high (male dominated) share of self-employed retailers and informal family employment in small scale neighbourhood stops, as well as a relatively high share of male full-time employment in the first, early established larger structures. Compared to this overall female employment rate, women are nonetheless over-represented in retail service work in general, and especially in part-time employment.<sup>134</sup>

---

<sup>134</sup> Such an overrepresentation is expressed by the following data: In 2005, 51% of Italian female retail employment largely exceeds the share of only 38% female employment in the overall economy (Eurostat 2005). This percentage in retailing has risen over time: In 1992, 37% of Italian retail employment was female, and 42% in 1997 (Deniz/Schüttelpelz 2001: 121; Europäische Kommission 1997, 2000). However, the share of female employment on both levels is still lower than compared to the EU-27 average of 62% in retailing in 2006 and 45% in the overall economy in 2005 (Eurostat 2005, 2008). More recent data is available for Italy only for all distributive trades together. At this aggregated level female overrepresentation is less visible. In 2009, the share of female employment reaches 40% in both the distributive trades and the overall Italian economy (ISTAT 2010), as compared to 45% in EU average (EU-27; data from Eurostat 2010).

The predominance of young and middle aged interviewees can be considered to reflect an overall trend in the sector. Due to its limited professional qualification requirements and/or lacking social recognition, retailing has been often considered as a transitory employment sector especially for a young work force entering the labour market. Yet, young employees today often remain for much longer not only in the sector but also in conditions of instability. As underlined by one union secretary, fixed-term retail employment is not any longer a limited phenomenon confined to a temporary transition phase between high school or university formation and a different stable employment position relative with the acquired educational degrees. Instead, it more and more becomes a long term condition for (more or less) young people. They may still enter the sector with a perspective of transition, but in lack of other opportunities remain trapped in this first employment status.

*Table 8a: Characteristics of interviewed employees I*

	<b>All</b>	<b>Firm D</b>	<b>Firm I</b>	<b>Firm C</b>	<b>Firm G</b>
<b>Number of interviews</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Contract form</b>					
Permanent Full-time	<b>4</b>	2		1	1
Permanent Part-time	<b>10</b>	2	2	3	4
Temporary Part-time	<b>4</b>	1	2	1	
Interim worker	<b>1</b>			1	
<b>Job title</b>					
Sales clerk	<b>7</b>	2	1	2	2
Cashier	<b>8</b>	2	1	3	2
Stock operator	<b>3</b>	1	2		
Promoter	<b>1</b>			1	

Regarding part-time, against a share of equally 38% of female employment in all distributive trades in 2002, Italian women in 2002 represented 80% of part-time employment in this sector and 73% of part-time employment in the whole economy (Eurostat 2002; against 81% and 79% in EU-15 average). In 2009, with respect to all service labour, female employment is at 49%, whereas the share of women among part-timers is 81%. Part time employment makes up for 18% of all service employment, whereas the share of women working part-time among all employed women in services is 29%. For the overall economy, the share of female employment has reached 40% for the same year (ISTAT 2010).

In terms of temporary employment, a less significant overrepresentation stems from the available data: In 2002, 11.5% of all employed women in the distributive trades held temporary contracts, against a share of 8.8% of temporary employment as compared to all dependent employment (12.4% against 11.5% in EU-15 average; data from Eurostat 2002). On the level of the whole economy the picture is similar: 14.7% against 12.3% for Italy, and 15.7% versus 14.5% in EU-27 average (data from Eurostat 2005).



Table 8b: Characteristics of interviewed employees II

	All	Firm D	Firm I	Firm C	Firm G
<b>Number of interviews</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Union affiliation</b>					
CIGL	9		2	3	4
UIL	2			2	
none	8	5	2	1	
<b>Age</b>					
Young (<30)	11	2	2	3	5
Middle aged (30-45)	8	3	2	3	
<b>Gender</b>					
female	8	4	1	4	
male	11	1	3	2	5
<b>Education</b>					
Lower secondary school and/or job training/certificate	5	1	1	2	1
High school student/degree	8	3	1	2	2
University student/degree	3	1	1		1
unknown	3		1	2	
<b>Living situation</b>					
With parents	5	1	2	1	1
Alone	4	1	1		2
With partner	5	2		2	1
With partner and children	3	1		2	
unknown	2		1	1	

Coming to a short description of the four companies chosen for employee interviews, two are specialised (firms I and D) and two non-specialised, food-dominated retailers (firms C and G). More precisely, firm G is an ex-Italian supermarket chain with a longstanding presence in the market. Since 2000, it has been owned by a French multinational company. With 50 employees, this outlet is the smallest under study in this sample. It is a medium-sized supermarket in a lower-income suburb. Four interviews with three permanent part-time and one permanent full-time employee were done in this case. Firm C is a hypermarket chain,

taken over from an Italian property by the same French multinational as G in 2001. In this company, six employee interviews covered four permanent part-time employees, one permanent full-time and one interim agency worker. They were carried out in two different outlets (C1 and C2), three in each case. Both shops have about 450 employees and are situated in big shopping centres in the periphery of Milan.

Firm I is also a multinational company. It has been operating in Italy since 1988, when it started out with its own greenfield shop openings. It is specialised in furniture and operates with large scale outlets only. The considered shop has about 500 employees and is situated in an industrial zone in the city's periphery. Interviews in this case comprised two permanent and two temporary part-time employees. As I, D is a specialised large scale retailer, with various outlets opened in Italy by a foreign multinational company since 1993. It sells sports equipment and sports clothes. The four interviewed employees work in three different outlets (one with a permanent fulltime, one with a permanent part-time and one with a temporary part-time contract) and in the centralised stocks (with a permanent full-time contract). The shops have about 100 employees each, whereas around 200 people work in the stocks.

The choice of these four companies reflects the research interest (a) in different, more or less hierarchical and/or participatory forms of labour control, (b) in different management strategies of flexibilisation, and (c) in the development of collective labour relations and bargaining on this issue. In fact, the four chosen companies differ with regard to the degree and form of flexibilisation and control strategies, as well as the extent of unionisation and the state of collective labour relations. On a first glance, both formal employment flexibility and participatory labour control appear as only limited in G and C, whereas they are more pronounced in I and D. Only the latter two cases, in fact, witness a more extensive use of temporary and interim employment, as well as management strategies of corporate identity formation, decentralisation and employee responsabilisation. The following analysis will however show that, below the level of flexible employment and explicit normative control strategies, there are relevant, different forms of more informal flexibilisation and subjectification in place in each of the four cases.<sup>135</sup>

As regards unionisation, as already briefly stated above, three of the four companies are traditional union strongholds with a long history of collective bargaining both at the company and the single shop level. Unionisation is particularly high in the considered shops in G and C where it reaches up to 70%. With 25% it is still above the estimated average for the retail sector (20%; data from own expert interviews) also in the considered outlet of company I. D,

---

<sup>135</sup> As mentioned, such a more detailed analysis is already the first part of the empirical study itself, and therefore only the topic of the following chapter six.

in contrast, is a non-unionised workplace, besides for the central stocks. However, also in the centralised stocks unionisation remains weak. Collective bargaining is supplemented by an internal, company-let structure of conflict-settlement and no collective contract had been achieved by the time of interviewing.

*Table 9: Flexibilisation, participation and unionisation in the four case studies*

	<b>Low formal flexibility and subjectification</b>	<b>High formal flexibility and subjectification</b>
<b>Low or no unionisation</b>		D
<b>High unionisation</b>	C, G	I

Having thus described the sample, some final remarks should be made as to the possibilities of generalising and comparison. The mentioned spread of interview partners across different shops, as in the cases of firms C and D, might have been expected to render the analysis and especially comparisons more complicated. This spread, in fact, is due to the difficulties of interview access described above. Yet, the diverse interview sides only proved to be a minor problem in the actual interview analysis. Working realities in D appeared as rather homogenous across the different shops as management strategies are very standardised and hierarchically determined for the whole company. For firm C, considering employees from different outlets actually opened up an interesting perspective of internal comparison and additional differentiation.

Also with regard to the employee sample, these initial access difficulties proofed little relevant for the analysis due to the study's enlarged view on precarisation, flexibilisation and subjectification. While it would have been extremely difficult to obtain a relevant number of interviews with highly precarious temporary employees only, consideration of different contract types, including part time and fulltime, permanent and temporary employment, made sufficient interview access possible despite the encountered fears.

Nonetheless, any comparisons and generalisations to be drawn from the analysis of these employee interviews should be considered with caution, taking into account the limited number of interviews per case. These limited numbers reflect the qualitative approach of in-depth interviewing. Especially the comparative chapters, confronting conflict experiences and coping practices in the different cases and for different employee groups, are to be seen as tentative, argumentative explanations for possible reasons of encountered differences, drawn from a thick description of the specific constellations of flexibility regulations, work

organisation, and employee characteristics in the cases at hand. They are not meant to indicate any necessary, abstract causal variables and correlations. In any case, this is not a problem, because the main analytical goal is not to explain any such causal relationships between firm or employee specific context factors on the one hand, and employees' work attitudes or agency on the other. Instead, the analysis aims to provide a critical investigation, as comprehensively as possible, of employees' experiences of workplace conflicts and coping practices that arise from the interviews as possible, socially grounded ways of acting and thinking displayed by the participants.

## ***5.2 The method and tools of problem-centred interviewing***

All interviews, both with employees and union representatives, are qualitative and semi-structured. For the employee interviews, the method of problem-centred interviewing was used (Witzel 1985, 2000). This method combines open narrative elements with guided questioning. It is particularly fitting for the subject-oriented approach chosen for this empirical investigation with its focus on everyday conflict experiences and common sense. The aim of problem-centred interviewing is to assess subjects' structures of relevance - or, to disclose what subjects "determine to be relevant" in their narrations (Witzel 2000: 2).

The background interviews with union representatives and shop stewards equally took a semi-structured form, based on guidelines pointing in the direction of alleged conflict areas regarding processes of flexibilisation and subjectification. They also relied on narrative elements, in order to give new, unexpected problems or aspects a chance to emerge. Yet, unlike the employee interviews, the focus here was clearly not on the narrative structures and on generating material for an analysis about common sense structures among union representatives. Though this might have been very interesting, particularly in comparison to employees' meaning constructions, the use of these background interviews was simply to obtain the required background information on work organisation, labour control, and employment strategies.<sup>136</sup> Methodological and analytical efforts were, thus, much more restricted. Therefore, the following description of the interview method and process primarily refers to the employee interviews, and only in a minor way to the background interviews, although the qualitative, semi-structured, and narrative spirit remains the same for both types of interviews.

---

<sup>136</sup> It is not possible in these background interviews to clearly separate 'pure' factual information from union representatives' meaning constructions and interpretations of the world that they describe. Yet, these meaning constructions were not in the focus of the analysis here. They are to be acknowledged as an existing filter when evaluating the overall picture of a workplace regime as it emerges from these accounts of union representatives.

With the method of problem-centred interviews, a subject's meaning constructions are explicitly addressed and analysed within their social context. Therefore, beyond focussing on interviewees' narrations and their subjective views on a specific research topic, formerly acquired knowledge about the objective conditions of subjects' acting and thinking is used to structure and guide the interview and to make sense of the observed meaning constructions. In other words, the problem-centred method is based on a dialectic approach towards inductive and deductive procedures that are seen as mutually interrelated and capable of generating new knowledge with which to strengthen theory building. Previous knowledge about a given research topic and social context conditions is referred to as a heuristic analytical frame, or with reference to grounded theory, as "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer 1954).<sup>137</sup> Aside from its interpretative function (with regard to respondents' common sense), it is used in the interview to generate questions (during a dialogue) and to guide the interview towards the specific research topic. Methodological flexibility is, thus, another core concept of problem-centred interviewing: Narration and recurrent questioning are combined according to the needs of the interview situation and the research object. The challenge is to use "previous knowledge to develop questions, without obscuring the original view of the respondent" (Witzel 2000: 6). More than a fixed methodological canon, this requires particular interviewing skills and communicative strategies.

This program of problem-centred interviewing has some similarities with ethnographic research (Garfinkel 1962, 1967; Katz 2002, 2009). The latter is equally characterised by an object-orientation, calling for adapting and choosing methods according to the research object. It considers subjects as central agents in constructing social reality, and consequently in its analyses searches to highlight the views and experiences of the concerned actors. The ethnographic approach is marked by a pronounced commitment to description. The research process is conceptualised as going from description to explanation and is achieved through the observation of social practices and reasoning. Yet, in contrast to problem-centred interviewing, ethnographic research seeks to take the unit of analysis it uses for its 'process analysis' directly from the meaning constructions people use in their narrations. The aim of

---

<sup>137</sup> According to Blumer, sensitizing concepts, in contrast to hypotheses, do not consist in preconceived notions which are to be tested, but involve "the researcher's attempts to discover, understand, and interpret what is happening in the research context. (...) A definitive concept refers precisely to what is common to a class of objects, by the aid of a clear definition in terms of attributes or fixed bench marks. (...) A sensitizing concept lacks such specification of attributes or bench marks and consequently it does not enable the user to move directly to the instance and its relevant content. Instead, it gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look" (Blumer 1954: 7, quoted in Bowen 2006: 2).

this is to analyse how pressure forms structure in everyday life, although this clearly inductive focus carries the risk of lacking a critical distance and analysis of the common sense detected.<sup>138</sup>

Coming back to the combination of narrative and structured elements, one central idea in this is to gain access to analytically structured information, as well as those parts of respondents' knowledge that are more close to immediate experience and therefore only available through narration and not through abstract reasoning. In fact, in order to assess interviewees' meaning constructions, detailed micro-level storytelling about concrete immediate experiences is considered as especially useful. The development of a storyline displays the development of a subject's common sense (and thus the way they make sense of their actions) - be it through direct, explicitly given explanations and opinions, or in an indirect, implicit way through the positioning of single events within the overall storyline. In order to reveal not only given meaning constructions, but the process of meaning construction in its social context, it is necessary to look behind the apparent storyline and especially to try to break up apparently self-evident common sense. Thus, two different (though combined) communicative strategies are needed for the interview. On the one hand, it is necessary to generate and facilitate free storytelling at the desired level of detail about the concrete everyday experiences. On the other, an important strategy is to elaborate on such interviewees' stories directly during the interview through different forms of recurrent questioning. The aim in this is to enhance comprehension (and, if possible, to foster self-reflection) by questioning seemingly self-evident statements and actions. Consequently, instead of a 'pure' narration, the interview happens as a process of continuous interaction and dialogue between interviewer and interviewee.

In terms of storytelling, Witzel insists in the importance of creating a trusting interview atmosphere. It is necessary right from the beginning to be upfront and honest, and to try to involve the interviewee as a partner in the interview process. This requires revealing the research aims to the respondent and to explicitly address him/her as an expert of his/her experiences, orientations, and actions. Beyond directly inviting the interviewee to a detailed telling of concrete experiences, story telling can be facilitated with previously formulated introductory questions. These should be broad so that interviewees can make their own associations and fill them with their own experiences, while at the same time giving the

---

<sup>138</sup> A similar criticism was already voiced above in the literature review with reference to the focus on participant observation, which is present at least in part of the current Italian labour ethnographies. Obviously, a more detailed reference to a wider range of different current ethnographic authors would be necessary to sustain and elaborate this criticism, as this research area is far from homogenous and is characterised by a multiplicity of inspiring, in-depth research.

desired level of detailed description. In order to guide the storytelling towards the research topics of interest, further subsequent questioning can be used. To avoid interrupting the process of storytelling, such explorative questions should address the relevant thematic aspects in the order in which they come up in the interview. Only once a particular story has been sufficiently described should ad-hoc questions be employed to address further topics that were left out.

Next, confronting interviewees with contradictions and dilemmas in their own storytelling – whether these relate to the social context conditions of their agency or emerge within their own thinking and storytelling - is proposed as a crucial tool to question self-evident common sense and to render processes of meaning construction visible. Redundancies in the narrations can be extremely useful for this as they might reveal different viewpoints on the same topic, or possible contradictions in interviewees' meaning constructions and experiences. In addition, interviewees' statements can also be directly taken up by the interviewer in clarifying questions or by proposing their own interpretations of the story told and explicitly asking for their validation by the interviewee. Obviously, as for storytelling, such confrontations and interventions require a trusting relationship, which has to be carefully established throughout the interview process.

During the research process, several problems came up with regard to these interview strategies. It was difficult to employ questions presenting and insisting in a dilemma situation that required a decision process without simultaneously also producing a closure and a limited positioning of interviewees' on one side or the other only. It proved a difficult task to formulate dilemma questions in a way that really renders visible the movements in interviewees' common sense, their confrontations, and coping with contradiction. Such dilemmas and contradictions need to be formulated out of the narrations and experiences of the interviewees, thus making them accessible for common sense. But, they cannot be simply introduced and conceived of as abstract, externally defined, purely rational questions of an 'either-or' or 'as well as' type. This is a highly demanding task for the interviewer who needs to become aware of upcoming contradictions and to spontaneously find the right formulation during the interview. Therefore, it would have been useful to more carefully develop suggestions for possible concrete formulations before the interviews, just as for the introductory, narration-generating lead questions, or to do so in a more consistent way on the basis of the first interviews. The task in this would have been to explicitly translate analytically focussed potential fields of conflict into (imagined) common sense categories.

Moreover, the success of such confrontations crucially depends on the interviewee and the interview situation. During this study, time was sometimes too scarce to develop any real relationship of trust with interviewees rushing during a break time. These time limits, together with the open narrative elements of the interview strategy, in some cases also led to an incomplete consideration of the pre-defined core topics and analytically derived conflict fields covering the diverse aspects of processes of flexibilisation and subjectification.<sup>139</sup> Locations were also difficult when interviews had to take place in noisy public spaces (bars) or in the rooms and presence of shop stewards. Particularly in these latter situations, it was difficult to open up communication patterns and to make interviewees get out of the question-answer game and narrate personal experiences. However, there have also been opposite cases with (not necessarily) extensive, but above all trusting and open communication processes and detailed narrations, although the difficult and uncertain task of addressing contradictions remained. This concerns not only contradictions within interviewees' narrations and thinking. Referring to practical everyday conflicts in some cases also proved to be difficult - as admitting an (unresolved) conflict within everyday work routines already presupposes (a) a certain trust relationship, and (b) some level of self-reflection and readiness to distance oneself from common sense strategies that are precisely used to conceal such conflicts, especially in a situation where one has limited action potential. That is to say: while the aim of the dilemma questions is to put into question such common sense patterns, such an endeavour is a challenge which has to be expected to repeatedly meet resistance from the interview partners.

Having provided some insight into the interview method and problems confronted, the concrete instruments used in the research process are now presented. These include, first of all, an elaborate interview guideline, which plays a central role not only for orientation during the interview, but above all in the interviewer's preparation and in the further elaboration and operationalisation of both abstract research questions and analytical strategies. Aside from the guideline, the following strategies were employed. Short questionnaires were distributed to assess interviewees' social characteristics and all interviews were tape recorded. Additionally, post-scripts were used to summarise each interview and note initial ideas for interpretations.

---

<sup>139</sup> While on a formal level, this poses problems for comparison, on a practical level, it was less important as the research aim is not to develop employee types or an encompassing mapping of all conflict experiences and coping practices for each employee, but rather an analysis of the emerging range of possible ways of coping, the action potential, and the prospects for enlargement that these generate. Nonetheless, further relevant coping practices might have come up if there was more time for all interviews, even if it is possible to argue that a narrative interview approach particularly facilitates the emergence of the issues considered most relevant by interviewees themselves.



Different from what was recommended by Witzel, questionnaires were not introduced in the beginning of the interview to raise initial topics for communication. Instead, they were handed out only afterwards, to avoid giving an impression of a formal, hierarchical, question-answer focussed interview atmosphere.

To conclude this section, a brief overview of the interview guideline, the lead questions, and core topics is given. (The complete guideline for the employee interviews is available in appendix 2) Three main aspects of everyday work experiences (and possible fields of conflict) were addressed: first, the employment conditions, including particularly the issue of contract flexibility and employment biographies; second, the labour process with its concrete work tasks, work organisation, and labour control; and third, work time and work flexibility. These three fields reflect the double research interest in processes of flexibilisation and subjectification, addressing all three levels of contractual, functional, and temporal flexibility, as well as experiences of labour control. For all three thematic fields, lead questions that were assumed to generate narrations, as well as possible follow-up questions, were formulated in advance. The interview strategy was to focus on experiences of everyday conflicts that would come up in the initial narrations. In case this did not occur, potential, expected fields of conflict were addressed with follow-up questions, while always trying to generate narrations. Follow-up questions were devised to address additional or more precise aspects of the labour process, the employment conditions, and their transformations to assess employees' opinions and meaning constructions.

Possible follow-up questions for the first field of employment conditions included potential experiences of employment-related precarisation: the state of work-life balances, experiences of employment insecurity, the latter's effects on work experiences, attitudes and identifications, as well as on relations with colleagues and one's own participation in collective interest representation and action. Regarding the second field of work experiences and the labour process, descriptions of concrete work tasks and the work organisation were in the focus. This particularly included experiences of different, direct and indirect forms of labour control and of transferred responsibilities, participatory offers, and internalised self-control. With this group of questions, I sought to guide the conversation towards the two supposed central conflict fields of (a) participation and recognition, and (b) high performance pressures and unlimited availability. Furthermore, social relations at the shop floor, with superiors, colleagues, and customers were given particular attention. The last field addressed everyday experiences of the particular work time organisation and flexibility systems that

each interviewee encountered. This includes considering regular time schedules, shift patterns, and break times, as well as overtime hours, informal arrangements, and the effects of increasing flexibility on interactions with colleagues.

Relations with colleagues and a collective agency (in the face of upcoming conflicts) were a further core topic. These were not supposed to be addressed separately, but wherever concrete conflict experiences and/or interactions emerged from the interviews. This was intended in order not to simply capture abstract opinions about collective action and actors, but to get hold of concrete and ‘applied’ orientations and practiced forms of collective coping and daily solidarity experiences. Eventually, not all of these follow-up questions necessarily had to be employed in every interview, but they were used flexibly according to the interview process and situation. More important than asking every single question is gauging the relevant issues of interests that should be paid particular attention to when elaborating on employees’ stories.

### ***5.3 Interview analysis using ideologically critical discourse analysis***

A discourse analysis approach was applied to analyse the interviews (Marshall 1994; Potter/Wetherell 1995; Hirsland/Schneider 2001). Similarly to the method of interviewing, the intention with this approach is to bring to light not only how employees act and think about their work and life conditions, but also how they construct their thinking. This is an important aspect with regard to the research goals for the present study, because it means moving the analytical focus away from the individual, who is instead situated within the larger context of society. The central question in discourse analysis is what kind of interpretative repertoires actors make use of to develop and articulate their thinking. These repertoires are understood as culturally and historically embedded (linguistic) resources that each allow for or restrict certain understandings of reality. That is, “the task at stake is to understand a text [here an interview] which is produced by a single individual as a ‘social expression’ (Volosinov) and to locate it within the overall social context” (Jäger 1999:171; translation K.C.). Such a contextualised and denaturalised analysis of employees’ common sense is crucial to find out about the resources employees dispose of not only to cope with but also to shape and change their precarious work and life situations; to learn about the conflicts and problems blocking their coping practices and their interest realisation; and finally, to search for possible impulses of collective action and interest struggles that arise from employees’ experiences.

Regarding the overall analytical focus of this study, the categories used here for the discourse analysis of the interviews are also focussed on conflicts and contradictions. To some extent, these categories are inspired by the “critical method of discourse analysis” proposed by Jäger and Jäger (1999: 158-187),<sup>140</sup> to another by the conceptual reflections offered by Hirsland and Schneider (2001) on “ideologically critical discourse analysis”. Relying on Foucault’s discursive understanding of power, Hirsland and Schneider describe the ideological effect and content of discourses as the “production of fictitious universal truths” (373). In Foucault’s terms, discursive power results from the capacity to produce representations of the world and to set them as truth. Ideological constructions of meaning (as fictive universalisms) then are based on disguising, excluding and, un-naming both given social structures and power relations and alternative ways of acting, thinking, and living. Moreover, truth claims are realised by presenting and mystifying given social relations as natural, and therefore necessary and unchangeable conditions. Applying such an understanding of ideologically critical discourse analysis to the analysis of interviews aims to render visible hidden conflicts and contradictions in interviewees’ common sense. That is, it is an important analytical step to uncover how conflicts and power relations are un-named within subjects’ meaning constructions. More concretely, this requires paying special attention to any forms of naturalisations, normalisations, or fictive universalisms (levelling out existing interest conflicts).<sup>141</sup>

---

<sup>140</sup> Jäger and Jäger’s method puts much more stress on detailed linguistic analysis than what was undertaken here. Their method was developed primarily for media discourses, although they invite for its use to be explored on any kind of text material. All their concerns about graphic aspects, thus, are redundant for interview analysis. The reflections on the discourse context, in turn, can be modified and applied to the context of workplace regimes, management strategies, labour requirements, and ideological calls, as well as to the overall backdrop of hegemonic social discourses and regulations of labour. However, of particular interest here are their categories for the analysis of meaning constructions (179ff), especially where they assess practices to voice or un-name power relations, or social and cultural constructions such as normative orientations.

<sup>141</sup> It might be useful here to briefly comment on the apparently conflictive relation between discourse analytical and ideologically critical approaches. In Foucault’s sense, discourses produce reality through the constitution of agency-guiding knowledge as truth. No reality exists outside of discourse. Nor is there any neutral position from which to observe and engage in an ideologically critical analysis of discourses and common sense. From a discourse theoretical position, the focus shifts from a critique of ideology and material power relations to a criticism of representations and their social mechanisms of construction. While it is a strength of (Foucauldian) discourse analysis to reveal these production mechanisms of ideological constructions and truth claims, the concrete, practical, enabling, and constraining conditions under which such discursive mechanisms emerge as subjects’ practices remain invisible (Hirsland/Schneider: 377). Going beyond a strictly discourse analytical approach, the two analytical levels of discursive and structural analysis need to be combined in order to (critically) understand the functioning of social power relations as relations of hegemony. Therefore, discourse effects have to be confronted with social reality, in this case employees’ meaning constructions and narrations with the reality and shape of present workplace regimes of labour control, with their material conditions of work and employment, and with their own accounts of everyday problems, conflicts, frustrations, unfulfilled needs, desires, and interests. The last point, is crucial, as it most clearly allows going beyond any accusation of pretending to seek a neutral, objective position as an observer. Regarding the confrontation with structural conditions, the combination of both analytical levels does not necessarily produce any epistemological contradiction, as long as discursive and structural analysis are not conceptualised as independent but mutually

Beyond such practices to make (interest) conflicts disappear, a second focus of the analysis was on interviewees' strategies to appropriate and reinterpret encountered conditions, constraints, and opportunities, as well as ideological calls and meanings (in general). The self-constructions and discursive self-positionings that emerge from their narrations are of special interest. Analysing such self-representations is a way to reconstruct and understand how interviewees position themselves as active players within the given power relations (in this case, in the workplace), how they contribute to the latter's reproduction, transformation, and/or challenge.<sup>142</sup> On empirical grounds, the literature review clearly indicates the relevance of positive self-representations for employees' coping practices in the face of precarious work and employment relations. Still relying on the literature review, particular attention is paid to perceptions of each individual's own control and/or vulnerability as well as to the role played by moral justice expectations.

Regarding the analysis of self-positionings in cases of more openly narrated conflicts and displayed confrontational attitudes, a focus will be on how important non-identification and mental distancing are for interviewees capacities to reject encountered requirements (of labour, of identification with the firm, etc.), and how such non-identification is concretely achieved. Moreover, oppositions are a central analytical category in this respect. In other words, it is necessary to analyse how interest conflicts are described, and more precisely, on which grounds friend-enemy-relations are constructed, and thus, distinctions from others produced. This concerns relations with superiors, as well with customers and colleagues. Aside from opposing identities, collective ones are of interest here as well: the way in which collectivity and collective interests are perceived, with whom, and what kind of collective symbols are used for their communication.<sup>143</sup>

Turning to the concrete steps of the interview analysis, the first task was their transcription. Most interviews were transcribed integrally. For the last ones, however, word by word transcription was limited to central relevant passages, as an immediate sensibility for such passages increased in the process of analysis when known coping practices or new insights

---

interrelated. Analytical results of an ideologically critical nature themselves are to be understood as grounded, interpretative propositions and not as truth claims.

<sup>142</sup> As mentioned in chapter two, the concept of power as hegemony, which underlies this research project, sees subjects as actively contributing to the production and reproduction of power relations, and power as being achieved through a mix of consent and constraint. The resulting incomplete, non-monolithic, and conflictive character of power - always requiring reestablishment and always open to being challenged - is also the basis for a (Foucauldian) discourse analysis.

<sup>143</sup> Collective symbols are images, concepts, and metaphors that carry a shared social meaning belonging to a collective cultural heritage. Within a narration, they are assumed to be understood without further explanation. They can also be strategically used within discourses to evoke specific, shared associations and interpretations, and to foster consent and agreement (Jäger/Jäger 1999).

were revealed. Interview analysis was initiated case by case as soon as an interview had been transcribed. Aside from the processual category development, this step-by-step process was utilised to benefit from the close case familiarity developed during transcribing.

Analysis roughly followed the four steps recommended by Witzel: taking note of initial existing interpretations, elaborating case descriptions, condensing case-specific main topics, and finally, systematically contrasting findings in case comparisons. The first coding level consisted of making comments and jotting down ideas directly in the transcripts that referred to interpretations of detected fields of conflict and respective coping practices or to case specifics. For each case, interview passages were assigned codes according to the main topics and questions of the guideline. Sub-headings were added to the texts. On this basis, for each interview, a case description was drawn up in the form of a table. This table described: (a) the characteristics of the employee (age, gender, family background and housing situation, contract form, duration of employment for the current firm, official work time arrangements, union affiliation); (b) the central conflict experiences and coping practices for each of the three areas of employment, labour process, and work times; (c) a summary evaluation of gained action potential, the way and degree in which conflicts were solved and one's own interests enforced; and (d) case specific remarks or curiosities. Returning to the postscripts proved especially useful, particularly for the latter point.

Bringing together the results of the individual interviews, two bigger tables were constructed, summarising all conflict experiences and all coping practices encountered in the entire sample. This table was used for contrasting and comparison: to develop common core topics and practices, as well as relevant differences between emerging groups of employees and between the four companies considered; and to compare these findings with outcomes of other previous studies. Particular attention here and with the case descriptions was given to how individual, cognitive, and material coping practices are linked. Tracing such connections was central to checking for the supposed contradictory character of coping processes. It helped condensing single practices into larger, more or less adaptive or conflictive patterns of coping,<sup>144</sup> as well as assessing which resources different coping practices rely on and what kind of action potential they might produce, depending on their concrete combinations and available resources. The same has been effectuated for individual and collective coping practices: They were located and separately analysed in different subsections of the table, but connections between both levels were explicitly marked and indicated.

---

<sup>144</sup> The coping patterns that emerged are adaptation, appropriation of meanings, border drawing, and conflictive negotiations. See chapter 8.3 for the distinction of coping practices and patterns as well as for a summary of the findings.

Having described the empirical procedures, attention is now turned to the empirical analysis itself. This is done in the following four chapters. First, the forms of employment flexibilisation, work organisation, and labour control present in Milanese large scale retailing are described, and the four companies used for the case studies are presented in more detail. Then, employees' conflict experiences, their individual and collective coping practices are presented in three separate chapters.

## 6. Milanese large scale retailing

As a first step in the empirical analysis, this chapter discusses the management strategies of flexibilisation and subjectification which can be observed in Milanese large scale retailing. This structural analysis forms the basis on which employees' daily practices are examined later on in this study. It describes the conditions of flexibility and labour control that employees have to cope with.

Analysis is undertaken in two steps: First, an overall picture is provided about developments in Milanese large scale retailing. This is based on the background interviews<sup>145</sup> with union officers in all three union confederations, and shop stewards in eleven different large scale retail companies.<sup>146</sup> Second, the state of flexibilisation, subjectification and labour relations is described in more detail for the four case studies in which also the employee interviews were carried out.

Analysing the large scale retailing sector in Milan reveals the importance of informal flexibility arrangements and their individualised regulation of daily work organisation at the shop floor level. Labour control fits the pattern of 'subjectified Taylorism' (Matuschek et al 2008), with a mix of direct and indirect, hierarchical, and subject-based forms of control. The case studies point to differences in the extent of formal and informal modes of flexibilisation and subjectification. One can differentiate between two groups of companies with more (firms I and D) or less (firms G and C) strongly pronounced respective management strategies. In addition, cases are distinguished by the state of collective labour relations. This differentiation is unlike the previous grouping with strong bargaining positions for unions in I and G, and weak ones in C and D. In fact, despite the initial categorisation of firm C as traditional union stronghold (measured by its strong degree of unionisation), factual in-house labour relations in a more detailed analysis result as decisively eroded.

---

<sup>145</sup> Beyond the interviews conducted, this background analysis also refers to the relevant collective contracts for the retail sector and the concerned companies. For the national contract for the commerce sector see <http://www.cgil.it/CCNL/Commercio> (FILCAMS)/Terziario Distribuzione/Terziario Distribuzione Servizi Confcommercio/indice.pdf.

<sup>146</sup> Obviously, also shop stewards' and union representatives' accounts of management strategies and working conditions could be analysed as such coping practices. In fact, it is not possible to draw a perfect line between actual, objective information and personal experiences or politically motivated evaluations voiced in these background interviews. However, neither in the interviews nor now is there time and space to develop a deeper analysis of shop stewards' and union officers' conflict perceptions as subjective but socially framed meaning constructions. Such an analysis of conflict experiences and cognitive patterns as coping practices is undertaken only with regard to the employee interviews. Where pertinent, the detected conflict experiences on the level of employees is set in relation to shop stewards' accounts in the following chapters.

## *6.1 Flexibility regulations, employment structure, and labour control in Milanese large scale retailing*

### **6.1.1 Patterns of numerical, temporal, and functional flexibility**

To begin the structural analysis of flexibility regulations and labour control transformations, this section looks at the development of numerical, temporal, and functional flexibility in Milanese large scale retailing. It addresses differences between company types and briefly describes the state of collective labour relations.

It is difficult to obtain precise disaggregated data on flexible employment in retailing, whether this concerns the local context of Milan or the national Italian economy. The Italian national economic census, for example, does not differentiate between open-ended and fixed-term employment. It only distinguishes full-time from part-time and dependent from so-called para-subordinate employment (which designates interim work and different forms of (pseudo) self-employment such as ‘collaborations’ or project work). The only studies available on employment in Milanese large scale retailing are from Ballarino (2000) and Pietrantoni (2007/2008). While Ballarino’s study is based on only three firms, Pietrantoni utilises data primarily from Milan’s “Labour Market Observatory”. While this information provides valuable insight into current development trends, it only tracks labour market entrance and exits, and not the overall employment numbers. Also, firms are legally obliged to give information about employment numbers to the unions, but in none of the cases here was this done in any comprehensive way. For that reason, numbers presented here are largely based on estimates obtained through the background interviews.

The frequency of flexible employment in the Milanese large scale retail trade is not consistent. Shops with a lot of open ended employment contracts coexist with others where temporary employment is the rule. All in all, the sector seems to be undergoing a profound but slow change, as new recruitments are primarily hired with temporary contracts nearly everywhere.<sup>147</sup> The use of temporary, limited forms of employment appears to be increasing companies’ propensity to hire new staff despite the sector’s overall crisis in times of shrinking consumer demand and purchasing power. In contrast, those shops from the sample where

---

<sup>147</sup> This transformation of retail employment is facilitated by the above described labour market reforms and especially the so-called “law n° 30” (“legge 30” or “Legge Biagi”) from 2003, which made it possible to introduce a large number of flexible employment contracts. It is also reflected in Pietrantoni’s study on labour market entrance in Milanese large scale retailing (including hypermarkets, supermarkets, and warehouses): Between 2003 and 2005, 44.2% of new contracts took the form of fixed-term employment (19.8% full-time, 24.4% part-time), against 39.1% for permanent employment (26.8% full-time, 12.3% part-time). 14.5% were constituted by diverse, temporary training contracts and 0.9% were contracts for only one day. No interim labour is included in this data as it does not result in employment contracts with retailers, but with external interim agencies (Pietrantoni 2007/2008: 107).



flexible employment is not (yet) used to a large extent are characterised by a near hiring freeze.

In the companies under study, the share of different forms of flexible employment compared to overall staff numbers reached up to 75% in one extreme case (firm I). In other three companies, it lies between 20% and 50% (Z: 50%; M: 30-40%; Cn: 20%, with a declared management aim of 40%) according to shop stewards. For the others, there is no precise data available, but shop stewards maintain that the use of temporary contracts is largely confined to special periods of the year with high customer density (such as Christmas and Easter). Moreover, they are used to substitute absent colleagues (during summer holidays, parental leave, illness). This cyclical, seasonal use of temporary employment is an old practice in the sector. What is new, is the introduction of so called 'cyclical contracts' for the same purpose. These are permanent contracts, but with a shifting number of work hours over the year. They might equal normal part-time hours during a high sales period such as Christmas (mid November to mid January), but are then reduced to a more flexible schedule during the rest of the year, which includes Saturdays and Mondays as fixed work days (firm R). According to the interviewed CGIL-Filcams secretary, fixed-term employment accounts for about 10-15% of the entire work force in Milan's large scale retailing throughout the year.<sup>148</sup>

Different forms of temporary apprenticeships and training contracts are a common way to increase flexibility. In some cases (firm M), so called 'stagisti' (trainees) tend to even replace other fixed-term recruitment, as they enable greater employment flexibility and reduced wage costs at the same time. Yet, a recent re-regulation of training contracts lowers this flexibility, as it obliges firms to stipulate four-year contracts and to guarantee permanent employment positions for at least a certain quota of apprentices once the training period is over. Therefore, in cases with stronger overall use of flexible employment (firm D), the use of training contracts has diminished in recent years.<sup>149</sup>

---

<sup>148</sup> The share of 10-15% of fixed-term employment in retailing is similar to the official numbers for the overall Italian economy, as well as the European average (both 11.9% in 2005, see European Foundation 2005; 18-19% for all Italian employment in 2008, see Coletto/Pedersini 2009). Yet, it is much lower than the numbers indicated by Jakobsen. According to her sources, in 1999 already, about 75% of the retail workforce was employed on a temporary basis, that is with fixed-term contracts or through interim agencies (Jakobsen 2002: 33). Given the allegedly still limited use of interim labour within the Milanese context, it appears improbable that such high numbers are reached in Milan. However, estimates from union officers are to be considered with caution, because they might have a propensity to underestimate the spread of temporary employment as it undermines their traditional strategies of workforce representation.

<sup>149</sup> Apprenticeship contracts had to be re-regulated recently, following a decree from the European Union. The former 'formation contract' was abolished and a new apprenticeship contract created through the legge 30. However, the reduction of flexibility caused by this reform is only limited, as trainees can be licensed much easier than 'normal' employees. In addition, they are paid only so-called 'expense allowances.' The new legislation extends this low paid period to the now obligatory four years of training, which is quite long

A further way of flexibilising retail employment is its externalisation to third parties. Interim work seems to play a (still) minor role in Milanese large scale retailing. It is especially used to cover shop openings on Sundays. At least as often, however, Sundays are covered by in-house staff, either with or without special contractual obligations. A common practice is to hire (student) part-time workers with very low weekly work hours covering only weekends as contractually defined work days.<sup>150</sup> Instead, more important seems to be the presence of merchandisers or promoters. These are employed by single brands to sell and/or promote their goods within confined areas of the shop. A classic example is that of so-called ‘boxists’, working at the perfume stands inside the big department stores. Such externalisation also exists within supermarkets and especially for the butchery and hot-food take-a-way departments.<sup>151</sup> According to the reports of shop stewards, promoters generally work with unstable contracts of all sorts, from classic fixed-term to interim employment, or with so-called ‘collaborations’, a special form of (pseudo) self-employment.<sup>152</sup> Accordingly, this field is characterised by an extremely high employee turnover. Its growth entails an extreme fragmentation of work realities as employees within one and the same shop do not only hold diverse kinds of contracts, but depend on different employers. Their supervisors could be from the retail store in which their job is located, an individual company whose products are promoted within the retail shop, or an interim agency serving as a liaison between these external companies and the retail shops.

Fragmentation does not only concern employment relations and contracts. It also impacts daily work conditions that tend to get more and more differentiated among the ‘in-house’ staff. To understand the reasons for this development, it is necessary to consider jointly the levels of numerical and temporal flexibility. In fact, introducing unstable contracts equally increases

---

especially with regard to the rather low degree of formal qualifications required for the work as sales clerk, stock operator or cashier in large scale retailing.

<sup>150</sup> In one case (firm M), some work tasks are also externalised to ‘cooperatives,’ which are responsible for restocking work during the night. Originally, such ‘cooperatives’ developed as workers’ federations, but today they operate largely as a form of interim agency. Within this sample, M is a special case because this company is registered as a wholesaler. Its activities, therefore, are regulated by less restrictive legislation compared to the retail trade, especially when it comes to the use of night labour and ‘cooperatives’. As this firm also sells to individual customers, it is nonetheless included here with the sample of retail traders.

<sup>151</sup> If we would consider the entire production chain linked to retail trade, and not only the work realities within the shops, the amount of externalised employment would be much higher as one of the major trends in retail firm structures in the last decade has been the externalisation of formerly integrated supply chains (Pellegrini 2005).

<sup>152</sup> ‘Collaborations’ are considered ‘para-subordinate’ employment positions, which is a category between subordinate and autonomous labour. As indicated above, they are officially considered to be autonomous labour with ‘project’ based contracts, but often end up being a low paid, and precarious form of pseudo self-employment, highly dependent on the directive force of one single employer. Even though they were relabelled as ‘project labour’ by the law no 30 in 2003, the original name of ‘collaborations’ is still widely used.

margins for work time flexibility. Companies recruit new staff with unstable contracts to slowly substitute formerly standard forms of employment regulation. New staff is generally not only employed on a temporary basis, but also with less favourable conditions, compared to the rights and protection standards acquired through labour struggles in Fordist times, which were guaranteed to the old work force. This results in a differentiation of employment standards, or the creation of “employees of series A and series B”, as one shop steward puts it with reference to Huxley’s novel *Brave New World* (shop steward from FILCAMS, firm Cn). Among the in-house staff, the process of fragmentation does not only occur with temporary but also with open-ended contracts, as different employment standards equally exist within this group depending on the date of recruitment. This is a first empirical clue supporting the argument that a generalised process of precarisation takes place within ‘standard’ employment positions. Differentiation especially concerns work time regulations, such as employees’ obligation to accept flexible, spontaneously changing time schedules, or the definition of Saturdays or Sundays as normal contractually fixed work days, i.e. as obligatory and without requiring any pay supplements.

Furthermore, work time flexibility is enhanced by part-time contracts. These enable a more varied distribution of personnel numbers over the day and the week, ensuring a more efficient coverage of prolonged opening hours. In effect, a large variety of vertical or horizontal allocations of part-time hours is used in the shops under consideration.<sup>153</sup> Short daily part-time shifts of no more than four hours are a common management practice not only to increase flexibility, but also to avoid paying for break times.<sup>154</sup> Such short part-time shifts are often used in combination with split shifts for full-timers. These are shifts covering morning and evening hours with a long break of several hours in between.

In addition, part-time hours can be more easily combined with overtime work.<sup>155</sup> This combination of part-time and overtime work appears as one of the central reasons for increasing temporal and, indirectly, numerical flexibility in a majority of cases investigated. Along with the widespread restrictive employment policies that largely limit hiring new employees only for seasonal contracts, it produces constant under-staffing or at a least scarce workforce coverage. This shift from full-time to part-time employment is an older, but

---

<sup>153</sup> Vertical part-time implies a concentration of hours on few work days per week, resulting in practically full-time shifts on these days. Horizontal part-time refers to the distribution of hours across all work days of the week, with short shifts per day.

<sup>154</sup> Following Italian part-time law, employees have the right to a paid break of 10 minutes only after the sixth working hour. Additional break times have to be introduced by collective bargaining.

<sup>155</sup> Such overtime generally regards regular overtime, paid with the due supplements. But, as was evident from the employees’ accounts, overtime requirements also come in the form of constant, but informal, and unpaid short prolongations of daily work times, like finishing service interactions at the end of a shift.

continuing trend in retailing in general. According to the interviews, part-time accounts today for about 60% of overall occupation in Milanese large scale retailing. In other words, part-time effectively constitutes the 'standard' form of retail employment in Milanese large scale retailing.<sup>156</sup> This fact is reflected also in data on labour market entrances. With 44.2%, part-time labour was the most commonly used contractual form for new employment in Milanese large scale retailing between 2003 and 2005. In comparison, 19.8% of new contracts were permanent, and 24.4% fixed-term contracts. In Milanese hypermarkets, fixed-term part-time employment, as an individual category, constitutes the most important contractual category among newly established contracts during this period (31.1%; Pietrantoni 2007/2008). Correspondingly, all interviewed union representatives confirmed difficulties or even the impossibility of now shifting from initial part-time to full-time employment, as would have been more common in the past. Aspiring to become both a full-time and permanent employee appears more and more as an unrealistic goal. Consequently, part-time work ends up less as a free choice and more of a forced condition of under-employment with limited income.

The flexibility potentials of part-time labour with regard to work times are additionally enhanced by recent Italian legislation, which sets stable work times as a norm, but limits their regulation to the individual employment contract (instead of collective bargaining). This has paved the way for individualisation and fragmentation of employment relations and work times. On this basis, the legal obligation to establish fixed work times in the employment contract does not necessarily lead to stable shifts for part-timers. Instead, the interviews indicated that very often individually contracted schedules are not respected at all, but constantly violated in everyday work reality.

---

<sup>156</sup> The numbers indicated here are much higher than the share of part-time in the distributive trades as well as in the Italian economy as a whole. In 2003, part-time on both these levels accounted for 8.6% of the overall workforce (Eurostat 2003). More recent data for the whole Italian service sector however, already indicates a part-time share of 15.9% in 2004, and 17.8% in 2009 (ISTAT 2010). As regards the overall economy, in 2009 part-time employment has risen to 14.4% (Wilthagen 2010, data from Eurostat November 2009). Referring to the development of part-time employment in retailing, older data equally indicates a much lower share of 6.8% in 1992 and 8.5% in 1995 (Deniz/Schüttelpelz 2001; European Commission 1997, 2000). Yet, data is inconsistent, and especially large scale retailing sticks out as a catalyst of part-time employment. Already in 1993, Frey and Montanino estimated the national part-time share in organised large scale retailing and among employees at the fourth qualification level to be at 89% (Frey/Montanino 1995: 89). Organised large scale retailing here refers to specialised, non alimentary shops from the same company chain.

In European comparison, Italy represents low part-time numbers on all these different sectoral levels. In 2006, part-time employment in European retailing was at 29% (EU-27, Eurostat 2008). With respect to the whole economy, in 2009, it accounts for 20% in the EU-16 and 18.8% in the EU-27 (Wilthagen 2010, data from Eurostat November 2009). This difference to the EU average is probably linked to a lower female employment rate (46.4% in Italy, 58.6% in EU-27 in 2009; data from Eurostat 2010), a lower wage level and a high share of illicit employment (and/or informal family employment in small-scale retailing), and the late introduction of part-time legislation in Italy. It is less pronounced for the region of Lombardy (with Milan as capital), which is considered one of the most 'European' regions in Italy, as overall part-time employment here reaches 17.6% (Lodovici/Semenza 2004: 19, 24).

Formal means of enhancing work time flexibility through ‘flexibility and elasticity clauses’, are only used extensively by one of the companies under study (firm D). Here, employees receive 10€ per month in exchange for completely deregulated work times. Flexibility and elasticity clauses in this case are not even collectively regulated, as no collective bargaining exists in the concerned firm.<sup>157</sup> The so far limited use of flexibility clauses in all other concerned cases might be considered a success of union bargaining efforts. Or, it might simply indicate the fact that other more effective management strategies exist to provide the desired flexibility, rendering such legalisation for actually flexibilising schedules unnecessary. In all cases at hand, frequent, spontaneous changes to officially established fixed work times are a common practice. Shop stewards reported that employees receive extremely short notice for such management induced shift changes, as well as for overtime requests. Often, these arrive only the day before the required change or in case of overtime even on the same day. The employees living close to their work place are called in at home by telephone even only a few hours before the requested extra-work.

In other words, through the use of both overtime work and spontaneous work time changes, temporal flexibility is achieved, above all, through informal ways at the level of the daily work organisation. This means that flexibility arrangements are to be negotiated in direct interactions between individual employees and direct superiors. Consequently, the still existing collective norms and restrictions established by existing laws and collective bargaining are slowly and invisibly eroded ‘from within’, due to this trend of increasing individualisation and informalisation.

Functional flexibility is also achieved mainly on an informal, individualised level. Formally, functional flexibility is very limited as, in most cases, employees are assigned stable work tasks in specific departments by contract. Spontaneous, short-term exceptions are made to cover gaps in the workforce coverage, and in several instances, employees are given additional work tasks on a permanent basis. That is, they perform work tasks and responsibilities exceeding the qualification and pay level fixed in their contracts. Opportunities of formal skill development and recognition of additional qualifications with an appropriate pay rise, however, seem rather limited. On contrast, management’s strategies of cost reduction and flexibilisation induce an opposite trend of standardisation and

---

<sup>157</sup> The obligation for such collective regulation was introduced only a year after the interviews, with the 2007 law on the welfare protocol. As mentioned above, such flexibility and elasticity clauses make changes in contractually fixed work times and hours possible (see chapter four).

centralization of work tasks.<sup>158</sup> For example, purchasing is mostly centralised for the whole company to obtain favorable prices and control over supply chains. In the fresh food counters of super- and hypermarkets, increasing quantities of goods arrive already portioned and packed, while this used to be handled by shop floor staff upon a customer's request. Together with reduced opportunities for obtaining increases in part-time hours, this situation produces an important destabilisation of paths towards professional growth.<sup>159</sup>

Looking at the case differences in more detail, the degree and form of functional flexibility appears to depend mostly on shop format and size, with less fixed roles existing especially in smaller, non-specialised outlets. Flexibility and differentiation of work times are strongest in those shops where the employment flexibility is also the highest. Regarding, the use of both temporary and numerical flexibility, there are important differences between relatively new outlets opened by foreign companies within the last 10-15 years and shops of (originally) Italian companies with a long standing presence in the market. While the former are characterised by relatively high degrees of labour flexibility, generally imposed unilaterally by management, the latter have witnessed a much lower incidence of flexibilisation, which is largely re-regulated through collective bargaining. These differences seem to reflect, above all, the individual history of each company and shop, the structure of employment, as well as the industrial relations established by each in the past.

Those shops with a long presence in the market are characterised by a preexisting stock of stable open-ended employment, combined with a relatively high degree and long tradition of unionisation. Union density in Milanese large scale retailing, according to union secretaries, lies between 15% to 20%. In some shops with long standing union traditions, it reaches up to 30%, or, in three of the cases at hand, even 60% (shop G, shop R) and 70% (outlet C of firm C). Both factors, the greater stock of permanent employees and the strong tradition of

---

<sup>158</sup> This trend is equally reflected in data on labour market entrance: "The majority of new employment is for young employees (54.2% are younger than 30 years) with low education levels (36% with the minimal school requirements only)." More precisely, 1.4% are younger than 19 years, 25.2% are between 20 and 24 years, and 27.6% between 25 and 29 years old. "Not qualified professional roles (4th level and below, such as sales clerks, stock operators, cashiers, etc.) are the most frequent category in Milanese large scale retailing as a whole. Though there are important differences between supermarkets, hypermarkets and warehouses. Especially in hypermarkets employment at the 4th level and below obtains a high share of 45.3%" (Pietrantonì 2007/2008: 105f, 109; translation K.C.).

<sup>159</sup> Voss-Dahn's 2000 study on 'service Taylorism' pointed to a strict division and fragmentation of work between the different shop areas (for example, in a supermarket) of cash desks, selling departments, and service counters. That analysis found a clear differentiation of distinct logics of rationalisation, implying higher qualifications, less standardisation, and reduced numerical flexibility at the service counters versus low qualifications, high automation, and high numerical flexibility at the cash desks, and leaving the selling departments in between with a high automation of stock operations but still existing customer contacts (Voss-Dahn 2000: 6f). It seems that the logics of rationalisation seem to converge on the cost reduction imperative in large scale retailing and in general.

collective labour relations, tend to limit managements' possibilities for increasing flexibility. On the one hand, due to the encompassing protections against dismissal established in article 18 of the Italian Labour Statute, the existing personnel can only gradually be substituted following retirement. On the other, in these strongly unionised cases, flexibilisation presupposes a change in existing, collectively regulated employment standards and work conditions that has to be negotiated with the unions.

Newly opened shops, owned by multinational corporations, in contrast, are not strongly unionised. In these shops, no tradition of collective interest defence exists and often there are no shop stewards at all. From the beginning, they operate with a much higher share of flexible employment, facilitated by current labour market policies and legislation. For them, the problem of substituting old contracts and negotiating flexibility regulations arises to a much lesser extent. There are also fewer opportunities for collectively organised resistance to flexibilisation strategies.

However, employment and work conditions today are also under pressure in those shops with a longer market presence and stronger tradition of industrial relations. Reflecting the sector's overall internationalisation, nearly all of the traditional Italian firms have been taken over during the last decade by foreign (mostly French) companies.<sup>160</sup> In most cases, this seems to have induced a pronounced change in management strategies. This includes ruptures in industrial relations as well as more decisive attempts to introduce flexible forms of employment and to deregulate work times. On this backdrop, management attitudes about labour flexibility seem to be moving towards a reinforced unilateralism, i.e. a more authoritarian and arbitrary style of management. This is also true for the two big remaining Italian companies. Data obtained through the background interviews provides insufficient insight into related historical developments to evaluate how much of this unilateralism is really new in each single case. Such a trend is described by Pellegrini who observed a reacquisition of unilateral decision power of employers during the last rounds of company level bargaining (Pellegrini 2005). Among the cases under study here, this trend was repeatedly confirmed by shop stewards. In several cases they reported losing all relations with an employer. (Most strongly this occurred in firms C and Cn. As one shop steward put it: "*We live a situation of non-relations.*" In this situation, occasions for meetings and discussions depend entirely on management's will, thus ignoring legal obligations. Shop stewards

---

<sup>160</sup> The only remaining big Italian groups, at least in the segment of non-specialised large scale retailing (supermarkets, hypermarkets, and department stores) are the supermarket chains Coop and Esselunga, both of whom cover the entire national territory.

complain about not having a clearly available counterpart. Frequent changes of managers, both on the level of individual shops and the company as a whole further this problem.

The responses from unions to flexibility strategies pursued by a management tend to oscillate between “rejection” and “stabilisation” (Ballarino 2002; Ballarino 2005).<sup>161</sup> Concretely speaking, where they still have a say, unions try to make flexibility an issue of collective contracts, in order to obtain a maximum stability and re-unification of employment relations. The bargaining level pertaining to and used for these issues of flexibility is mostly secondary bargaining, meaning at the company and/or shop level. Unions’ strategies for this appear to be clearly anchored in the tradition of a Fordist ‘standard’ employment. They seek to prevent unstable forms of employment or to bring them back into the frame of open-ended contracts. The goal is to achieve the flexibility required by the firms within the context of stable employment contracts and clearly regulated work time schedules. For this purpose, concessions are made with regard to certain rights and protection standards linked to former ‘standard’ employment in exchange for limitations or a more favourable re-regulation of flexibility. For example, rather than accepting the introduction of fixed-term or interim employment for Saturdays and Sundays, shop stewards in one shop with strong union positions proposed a mechanism of rotation to cover weekend openings with the existing, stable personnel, negotiating additional pay in exchange for this flexibility (shop stewards from FILCAMS, firm R).

The most contentious issues in current bargaining and related collective conflicts are the increase of part-time hours and the organisation of work times, with regard to both their flexibilisation and extension (especially regarding work on Sundays). The most spectacular recent conflict mentioned in the interviews was a 220 hour-long strike that took place in one of the department stores in the beginning of 2006 (firm Cn). The aim was to oppose a re-organisation of work times put into practice unilaterally by management. This would have entailed the introduction of ‘split shifts’ for full-time employees as well as uniform short daily midday turns for part-timers (who formerly had vertical shifts, concentrated on a few days of the week). The conflict was caused by a change in the distribution of work times across the day and the week rather than from flexibilisation in terms of more unstable, varying work

---

<sup>161</sup> It should be noted that interviews were primarily conducted with union representatives from CGIL-Filcams. In general, this is the union confederation with a comparatively more confrontational approach, and which pays the greatest, though still limited, attention to precarious, flexible, ‘non-standard’ employees. CGIL-Filcams also represents the majority of shop stewards in the sector. So the described strategies can be expected to be the dominant ones. Regarding the other confederations, reactions towards flexibilisation might be more hesitating and more oriented towards co-management.



times.<sup>162</sup> Despite their overall weakening position, up to now, unions' bargaining on the issue of work times seems to be rather successful, where it has been attempted: Officially, according to the negotiated collective contracts, work times remain strictly regulated in most cases at least for permanent full-time employment (firms A, C, Cp, Cn, E, G, R). A high level of conflict arises nonetheless from the informal flexibilisation described above, which has been eroding these regulatory successes. All in all, even in the well unionised outlets, shop stewards consider their current resistance against deregulation as unstable, be it in terms of numerical or temporal flexibility. They complain about a loss of rights and protection standards, having to make excessive and painful concessions, and experiencing a deterioration of influence and power positions within the shops, in line with the indicated general changes in collective labour relations.

It should be made clear that, even within the two distinguished groups of old and new shops, the picture is far from homogenous, as companies differ with regard to their concrete strategies and traditions of collective labour relations. Beyond different firm histories in terms of industrial relations and existing employment structure, management's flexibilisation strategies depend on the shop size (as indicated above with respect to functional flexibility) and location in question. All these factors together determine not only the flexibility requirements, but also the possibilities to realise them from within, or whether there is a need to change the existing framework.

One shop steward from a smaller, 30-year-old shop with 35 employees (firm Cp), for example, described the small size of the shop, together with its long history of good shop floor relations as a decisive barrier against any management attempts towards more unilaterally organised flexibilisation. 'Such 'good' shop floor relations comprise continuously strong collective labour relations<sup>163</sup> as well as a personal, confidential atmosphere between employees and superiors. At the same time, this shop is characterised by a low necessity and also a limited opportunity for enhancing flexibility. Most employees entered the shop long before recent labour market reforms with stable open-ended contracts, and opening hours of this medium scale outlet located in a residential neighbourhood are still limited (no Sunday openings). In contrast, opening times of larger outlets at the industrial periphery, in shopping centres or in the town centre, are more extensive. In this specific case, a strongly regulated system of split

---

<sup>162</sup> At the time of the interviews, this struggle was still ongoing and its outcome uncertain. Unfortunately, attempts to contact the concerned shop stewards later on to get an update on the evolution of the conflict were not successful.

<sup>163</sup> The interviewed shop steward underlined management's continuous availability for interaction and bargaining. While such interaction remained actually conflictive, this constant availability was interpreted as an equally problematic management strategy. It aimed to involve unions into contentious decisions regarding work organisation, in order to increase legitimacy.

shifts for full-time workers is in place. This is combined with a few part-timers who are employed to cover the less customer intense three-hour midday break of full-timers. Flexibility requirements are much higher in the big hypermarkets of the same company, where they are met by a strong recourse to flexible and especially part-time employment and a system of more flexible work times instead of fixed split turns.

Summing up the state of flexibilisation in Milanese large scale retailing, it is possible to speak of a gradual joint substitution of open-ended and/or full-time employment and fixed time schedules with instable contracts, part-time employment, and more flexible, shifting work times. A less pronounced but important trend related to management's strategies for cost reduction is the diffusion of informal forms of functional flexibility used to deal with scarce workforce coverage. On all three levels of numerical, temporal, and functional flexibility, these increasing trends build on older, already pre-existing flexibility strategies. Current transformations are leading to a differentiation and individualisation of employment relations and working conditions. These are realised more quickly where overcoming structures of regulated stable employment, as well as union traditions defending them, are weakest. Aside from a still rather heterogeneous use of flexible forms of employment across the sector, the most important common trend is the informalisation of temporal flexibility arrangements and the resulting silent erosion of existing collective (re-)regulations. Flexibilisation effectively seems to be catalysing a growingly informal and individualised regulation of labour relations. This development goes well beyond the level of decentralisation which typical for the bipolar Italian labour relations system. Though company and/or shop-related second-level bargaining assumes an important role for the collective regulation of flexibility, processes of flexibilisation are in themselves pushing labour regulations to an even more decentralised and individualised shop floor level.

### 6.1.2 Flexible labour processes and normative control

This section presents the state of labour control in Milanese large scale retailing. It addresses management's strategies of direct control and supervision, control over service interactions and emotional labour, as well as indirect, subjectifying control through decentralisation, corporate identity formation, and individualisation of labour relations. Differences between company and union reactions are also considered.

Regarding the interlinkage between work atmosphere, work load, and labour control, most shop stewards report having a stressful work environment. They refer to strong pressures of

always being active, never appearing without anything to do, and as a result, fulfilling work tasks that are not part of their own work contract. This stressful work situation derives to a large extent from management's cost reduction strategies and the resulting latent understaffing, mentioned above.

Hidden supervision seems to be a common tool to control employees' work performances. This includes management making use of incognito visits on the shop floor. The latter are carried out by so-called 'mysterious customers' who are control agents employed for this purpose or by company managers unknown to a shop's staff (especially at firms R and Cn). But, control strategies also play out publicly. For example, in several cases, the shop's managing director walks through the departments and disciplines employees even in front of customers (especially at firm R).

Direct control is moreover exerted with the help of video cameras and security agents. Officially introduced in the shops to prevent shoplifting, both can be employed as tactics to control the work force. In spite of several problematic experiences in some shops (firms C, Cp, M), the use of cameras and agents is evaluated as rather well regulated through collective contracts and as relatively unproblematic by nearly all the shop stewards. Yet, the example of a spy discovered in one of the shops at hand shows that management's control strategies go far beyond the legal and bargained frames. In that case, a seemingly normal employee in reality had been paid for signalling irregularities in his colleagues' work performances, possible thefts, as well as positive views towards unions (firm M). Management in that shop had tried to construct a hidden system of supervision registering all movements of employees across the shop. This was supposed to function through microchips concealed in the work clothes and in sensors installed in the shop. The attempt was discovered by unions and the firm was taken to court.<sup>164</sup>

These hidden, hierarchical control strategies can be viewed as contributing to an atmosphere of permanent mistrust, insecurity, and tension, as suggested by Curcio.<sup>165</sup> Yet, in the cases at hand, hidden control is evaluated in rather heterogeneous ways by the interviewed shop stewards. Some criticised open, visible control more strongly, perhaps because it publicly violates employees' dignity and/or because it might more directly enter their consciousness, causing more conflict experiences and stress articulated in the form of complains in front of shop stewards.

---

<sup>164</sup> At the time of interviewing, no court sentence had been pronounced yet.

<sup>165</sup> In his analysis of a specific Italian supermarket chain, Curcio even speaks of a "totalitarian system" (Curcio 2002, see chapter 3.4.3).

Aside from these direct forms of supervision, more indirect, subjectifying mechanisms of control are employed by management to regulate the relationship between employees and customers. Structurally, such control of service interactions particularly concerns cashiers. These are in a strategic position as they represent and produce the last impression a customer obtains from the shop. Control in these areas is exerted, for example, through ‘professional training courses’. What seems to be characteristic and new about these courses is not their existence as such. Several shop stewards confirmed that companies once used to invest much more in employee formation. Rather, today training is increasingly focussed on physical aspects: Aside from explanations on the shop’s current promotions and techniques to encourage customers to purchase things, employees are taught how to dress, how to put on cosmetics, how to move, and how to speak. In one case, such training was conducted by models. More traditionally, training includes typical phrases to use in the interaction with customers, like obligating cashiers to welcome, thank, and say good bye to each customer in a standard way and with a smile on their face. A further example is a role play carried out in one of the shops (firm Z). In this case, two employees are selected every morning to present in front of all other staff how to serve customers. Judging from shop stewards’ accounts, this ‘game’ also has a disciplinary intent, as the employees who have to present are assigned by the managing director. They are chosen based on personal preferences/antipathies and superiors’ opinions about individuals’ supposedly lacking work performances and service attitudes.

Beyond such ‘training,’ control over employees’ appearance, looks, and behaviour is already accomplished at the moment of workforce selection. Several shops try to hire exclusively young and ‘good looking’ personnel. This happens especially for work at the cash desks and even more for employees selling certain fashionable textiles. This trend has been present for a long time in fashion boutiques, but has now been spreading among big department stores and even super- or hypermarkets. Consequently, in one of the hypermarkets studied, the cash desk department of 130 employees is exclusively staffed by women (firm C).

The goal of all these control strategies involving employees’ personalities, bodies, and emotions is to make sure that they correctly represent the corporate image in their interaction with customers, and nothing else. These practices are viewed critically by shop stewards as contradictory to the goal of service quality. In the words of the FILCAMS union secretary, management would try to “transform employees into objects, functional to the company’s image and turnover”. Criticism is also increasing, because beyond such control strategies, effective job training and opportunities for professional development are very limited.

Apart from such attempts to gain control over employees' bodies, management's strategies of indirect control and subjectification appear to be rather limited, especially regarding decentralisation and respective participation. A shop's hierarchy generally consists of a traditional top-down model, "simple and capillary at the same time" (FILCAMS union officer).<sup>166</sup> On the first glance, this appears to exclude any substantial transfer of responsibility and decision powers down to the shop floor, thus, leaving little space and need for employees' self-regulation.

Yet, decentralisation and responsabilisation do take place on the level of department heads. These are increasingly held responsible for 'their' department's performance. For this purpose, they are assigned weekly or monthly goals for turnover and costs. On the basis of these goals, department heads have to 'independently' determine things like their staff's work hours. On the level of individual employees, economic decentralisation has played only a minor role up to now. Though, pay-related incentives linked to the company's performance (at least in C and M) and even some bonuses for individual work results (such as a reward for the highest single bill invoiced during Christmas time, for example at Cn) have been introduced recently in several shops and might gain importance in the future.

Above all, indirect control and subjectification take place by means of corporate identity formation. By creating a competitive group spirit, management tries to make employees feel responsible for their department's performance. Management rhetoric stresses the company as a collective and emphasises common firm interests. Additionally, internal competition is encouraged by means of rankings for turnover and profit. In these rankings, different departments within each shop or the same kind of departments across different shops are compared with each other. Competition and responsabilisation passes through more or less frequent company assemblies called in by management, either at the shop or departmental level. In such meetings, profit results are presented for each department (nonexistent only in E and M). At least indirectly, these communications result in an economic decentralisation reaching individual employees. To a lesser extent, such assemblies seem to be used for organisational decentralisation, total quality management or to increase employee participation in the work organisation.

Social activities appear as a central management tool of corporate identity formation as well. Most often, these consist of company dinners for special events (such as Christmas or a

---

<sup>166</sup> Hierarchies are simple because they follow a clear vertical structure (from the company's top management down to each shop's managing director and further down to the department heads), and capillary, because they are differentiated all the way down to the shop's individual departments, comprising specific responsibilities even on the lowest level (such as the function of department head and vice-department head).

manager's birthday). They also take the form of cultural events, such as theatre visits or weekend trips. In one case, presents are distributed for special events in an employee's life (such as marriage; firm E). An important aspect of all these identity-focussed strategies is that they constitute mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion operating directly on the shop floor: It's no longer just management but employees themselves who exercise social control among each other to increase the group's performance and maintain a group identity.<sup>167</sup>

Besides decentralisation and corporate identity formation, the third way for increasing a sense of responsibility and subjectification is the individualisation of labour relations at the level of daily shop floor interactions between employees and superiors. Managements frequently employ extensive strategies in this area. These take the form of explicit open-ear policies, based on personalised informal relations between employees and superiors. For example, it is very common to use the informal 'tu' instead of the formal 'lei' when addressing superiors. Superiors are presented, or have to present themselves, as approachable for all kinds of employees' individual problems, regardless of whether these are directly work related or even concerning private issues. Such attempts of rhetorically attenuating existing hierarchies are clearly linked with strategies of corporate identity formation. They are the basis on which actual daily work conditions, and especially flexibility arrangements, are constantly renegotiated between employees and superiors. In other words, indirect control and individual voice strategies, fostering the individualisation of labour relations, are an important management tool for realising the informal, individualised modus of flexibility regulations described above. Beyond this function, and aiming more strongly at increasing employees' self-responsible work attitudes, individualisation also entails formalised individual performance evaluations and instituting measures of success.

While the overall picture of Milanese large scale retailing shows a vast range of indirect control strategies, their distribution across different firms and individual shops is very heterogeneous, just as in the case of flexibilisation. They are strongest in the French companies that entered the market after the 1990s. Bit by bit, they are also taken over by the (former) Italian firms, especially by those who were sold to foreign multinationals. In consequence, a profound transformation of the paternalistic Italian firm model is taking place, not only in terms of collective labour relations, as described above, but also regarding the treatment of individual employees and the shop floor culture. In contrast to the new

---

<sup>167</sup> In one case, the management tried to involve clients into such control strategies, asking them in questionnaires for an evaluation of each department's services. According to the shop stewards' account, this attempt was successfully blocked.

management style, the latter combined a strict and openly displayed vertical hierarchy with the image of the ‘padrone’ as father of a firm family, who alone would guarantee employees’ well-being.

Today’s corporate identity formation in part still builds on this idea of the firm as a family. Yet, while hierarchies are also strong in the new model, they are now combined with a more explicit expectation of employees to contribute to positive economic results within a system of internal competition. Even without any relevant organisational decentralization, the rhetoric of the voice policies described invokes employees to be self-responsible corporate actors. In this, the persistence of strong hierarchies is not only a sign of the slow character of this transformation and a heritage of the familiaristic tradition. Instead, as is shown in the analysis of employees’ work and conflict experiences, it also represents a central constituent of the new enforced model of indirect control and subjectification. In other words, the workplace regime in the cases at hand constitutes a concrete example of ‘repressive integration’ (Artus 2008) and ‘subjectified Taylorism’ (Matuschek et al 2008), which was described above as a typical organisational model for low qualified, low paid, precarious service sector labour.<sup>168</sup> Labour control in Milanese large scale retailing effectively appears as a mix of strong hierarchical direct control and indirect management strategies of subjectification.<sup>169</sup>

In this, hierarchical control and subjectification even merge into each other, as the issue of service control and customer relations shows.<sup>170</sup> To give an example, disguised agents that pass through the shop and control employees’ service performances in a hidden way are a form of direct control. But, this strategy also renders supervision latent, invisible, uncertain, and potentially always there. In this way, occasional supervision aims at the internalisation of constant self-control. The same can be said for the use of cameras within the shops. Training

---

<sup>168</sup> These two terms are here used synonymously, although they might have slightly different connotations. The term ‘repressive integration’ stresses the authoritarian character of the integrative workplace regime, whereas ‘subjectified Taylorism’ more clearly points to the relevance of subjectification, responsabilisation, and self-control. Of interest in this study is underlining the functional, though not contradiction-free, combination of both aspects within management’s strategies.

<sup>169</sup> My findings show strong similarities to Artus’ analysis of management strategies of ‘repressive integration’. While Artus considered this combined control modus as typical for all sorts of precarious (low paid, easily substitutable, low qualified) service labour, the retail firm in her case studies (in contrast to the examined transport and restaurant companies) appeared as particularly characterised by repression dominated management strategies and few integrative control mechanisms. The empirical data here, while still suggesting a strongly repressive control character, underlines the simultaneous relevance of participatory and normative management approaches in retailing. (These participatory approaches are developed in differentiated degrees in the different companies considered here, as is shown below.) Outcomes are similar to du Gay’s and Curcio’s analyses of such mixed forms of control. At the same time, findings coincide with Ferreras’ assessment of the overall authoritarian character of retail workplace regimes, even if her analysis pays less attention to the contribution of indirect, participatory management strategies to this overall authoritarian effect. (see chapter 3.3.2 and 3.4.3)

<sup>170</sup> My empirical analysis here is also in agreement with Korczynski’s argument about an increasingly emotion and subjectivity related character of direct control (see chapter 3.4.2).

courses to improve employees' smile and looks, in turn, directly point at the internalisation of self-control and can be regarded as indirect control devices. Yet, these are still accompanied by traditional, hierarchical forms of supervision and (ex-post) disciplinary measures in case of 'bad' behaviour in front of customers.

The responses of union representatives to the different kinds of subjectifying control are ambiguous. They reflect the basic contradiction of such indirect, participatory management strategies as adopting employee interests while, at the same time, fostering the internalisation of labour requirements and control. Shop stewards are clearly critical towards financial, pay-related performance incentives. This is due to the latter's individualising and competition enhancing effects. In addition, performance rewards are met with criticism by shop stewards as they are most often unilaterally decided by the firm and not collectively regulated and guaranteed. Regarding other aspects of indirect control, the ambiguous character of their evaluations is more obvious. Shop stewards criticise having to be more responsible for the company's success when this is not linked with corresponding resources and decision powers necessary to enact that responsibility. A frequently expressed concern in that respect is cashiers' responsibility for correct invoices, sales figures, and customer satisfaction in a context of highly stressful work conditions.<sup>171</sup> However, unions also praise their work as having been the first to demand stronger responsabilising and normative management models in order to enhance employees' participation, autonomy, and satisfaction; and to have recognised the motivational effects of these practices long before employers did. Thus, they complain about the still limited and fragmented realisation of decentralisation, corporate identities, and individual voice opportunities.

An example of this fundamental ambiguity of responsibility transfers can be seen in shop stewards' discussion about a flexible, participatory work time model instituted for the cash desks in one of the analysed hypermarkets (firm Cp). This still experimental case is the only example of substantial organisational decentralisation and resulting self-management opportunities at the level of ordinary staff that has emerged from the interviews. Cashiers can

---

<sup>171</sup> In the case of firm E, shop stewards only recently obtained the right to abolish badges giving employees' full name, which made it possible for customers to complain about individuals. At firm M, management started to discipline cashiers for mistakes in the bills with reprimands and even retribution fees. (As this is a wholesales store, bills are higher and are more often paid directly through the banks that charge the company for any faults and consequent accounting problems or payment delays. Thus, there is more problem-pressure on the side of the firm.) In the case of firm Z, cashiers' responsibility for invoices is described as problematic because cashiers are frequently expected to leave the tills in order to complete other work tasks in their department or the stockrooms, even though these do not enter the profession and tasks defined in their contracts. At firm Cn, the shop steward was able to successfully refuse accepting any personal responsibility for the balance of cash so far. No formal contractual division of work tasks exists and employees handle all kinds of work that occurs in their department.



and have to decide among themselves how to distribute work times – obviously within the frame set by the company's requirements to assure a sufficient coverage of opening times. On the one hand, this model is valued by shop stewards for potentially allowing greater individual flexibility and participation in decision making. On the other, it is sharply criticised as confronting employees with the difficulty and obligation of handling staff shortages, as well as conflicting interests among colleagues, by themselves. Thus, they have to among each other distribute unpopular shifts and negotiate involuntary time flexibility requirements handed down from the company. According to shop stewards' accounts, these requirements effectively foster the exercise of social control and the internalisation of flexibility requests as individual and group responsibilities.<sup>172</sup>

There are considerable differences in shop stewards evaluations of management's indirect control strategies among the different shops. This regards not only the degree of criticism, but also whether the experienced labour control problems, and especially the different forms of indirect control and subjectification, are presented as new or currently undergoing a transformation. Roughly speaking, the most critical accounts were given by shop stewards from shops with an already higher degree of flexibility requirements and especially a higher share of temporary employment (firms Z and M) as well as those where strong transformation processes towards flexibilisation were currently taking place within a context of conflictive labour relations (firms Cn and R). Unlike direct supervision with cameras or security agents, unions and shop stewards only have a very limited influence on management's strategies of indirect control, as none of these have been an issue in collective bargaining negotiations in the companies under study, except for performance related pay.

In sum, the most evident characteristic of labour control in the considered cases is the hierarchical work organisation on which it is based, combined with a strong recourse to hidden means of supervision and direct performance control. Formal responsabilisation by means of economic and especially organisational decentralisation is limited. Instead, subjectification passes above all through management's initiatives to foster corporate identity, to enhance group spirit and competition, and to individualise labour relations. In this, the establishment of individualised, informal, voice-oriented relations between employees and

---

<sup>172</sup> Among others, Voss-Dahn pointed to these negative aspects of participatory work time regulations. She shows that such participation is motivated by management as a strategy of workforce integration as well as a means to transfer conflicts onto employees. Nonetheless, it might simultaneously increase employees' sovereignty over work times (Voss-Dahn 2000: Dienstleistungstaylorismus, p.14f).

superiors on the shop floor constitutes the basis for the equally individualised and informal modus of flexibility regulations in place in this sector.

Finally, linking both aspects of direct and indirect control, there are important management attempts to control employees' bodies and behaviours in front of customers, relying on training courses as well as supervision and respective workforce selection. In management approaches towards customer relations, cost reduction strategies and efficiency imperatives like work speed and turnover appear to dominate over improving service quality. This trend is reflected equally in the above indicated processes of standardisation and centralisation of work processes and the limited overall opportunities for additional skill development.

## ***6.2 Flexibility and labour control in detail: four case studies***

This section carries on the analysis of management strategies of flexibilisation and labour control on a more detailed level of four case studies. These are the same cases later used for employee interviews. For a better contextualisation, for each of the four firms, it retakes the brief general case description already given in chapter five when presenting the sample.

### **6.2.1 Firm G**

Firm G is an ex-Italian supermarket chain with a longstanding presence in the market. Since 2000, it has been owned by a French multinational company. With 50 employees, this outlet is the smallest under study in this sample. It is a medium-sized supermarket in a lower-income suburb. At the time that the interviews were being conducted, opening times were in a phase of restructuring, with frequent changes especially in terms of extending evening hours and an increasing though still irregular number of Sunday openings. From Monday to Saturday, the shop is roughly open from 8 a.m. to 8 or 9 p.m.

More than 50% of the staff here works part-time. Hiring temporary employees as a regular, non-seasonal practice has grown only in the last few years. This takes the form of either short-term contracts of less than a year, or above all, 4-year training contracts. More recently, short-term employment hired to make up for missing colleagues during holiday periods, in case of illness or for parental leave is occurring less frequently, as the management seems to be following a very pronounced strategy of cost reduction. In consequence there is a permanent latent understaffing and a persistent scarce workforce coverage in the store.

Official work times are relatively stable but characterised by a regulated, formalised flexibility. They are established ten weeks in advance on the basis of a fixed range of different weekly shift patterns (namely different weekly combinations of work days with morning, midday, and afternoon shifts). As a result of this system, work times are different for each employee, which offers the management considerable flexibility margins. Informal flexibility is very high in this case, with frequent spontaneous shift changes and overtime requests. This is one of the cases where very short notice is given for such changes and employees living close by are even called at home to come in to work spontaneously.

Functional flexibility is formally very limited, although it was once achieved through a union struggle. Employees are assigned to individual departments and specific tasks by contract. In contrast to the bigger hypermarkets in the sample, sales clerks here are regularly responsible for all stock operations and not only the replenishment of shelves in their departments. Their tasks include unloading the trucks when new goods arrive. Above all, functional flexibility is achieved in informal ways, in particular to fill spare hours at the cash desks. Thus, department staff is called repeatedly during the work day to cover shortages at the cash desks during short instances of time – in case of strong customer demand or during cashiers' break times. Additionally, informal functional flexibility occurs when 'normal' employees are supposed to temporarily substitute and take over department heads' functions. In case of absent department heads, sales clerks manage the allocation of work tasks and times among themselves. As a single department head cannot be present during the shop's entire opening time, this is evidently an effective strategy for the management to fill up holes and save costs. At the same time, it may also function as part of the indirect labour control strategies, which foster employees' responsibility and integration through informal recognition of competencies and the creation of informal hierarchies and distinctions between employees, as will be discussed later.

Regarding its labour control, shop G is characterised by a strong classical hierarchy and seems to utilise only limited indirect control strategies. Official decentralisation is strictly limited to department heads. There are no regular shop or department assemblies to communicate financial results and goals to regular employees. Such information passes through informal conversations between department heads and staff, probably also because of the smaller size of the shop. Shop stewards describe a strong 'departmentalism', as management strategies of identity formation are based on single departments rather than on the shop as a whole. Department heads are supposed to create a competitive group spirit and

mutual responsibility for performances and daily work organisation within their departments. Internal rankings with regard to both levels, departments, and shops exist but are not provided to employees. Department heads are put under strong pressure due to their responsibility for positive economic results and goal achievement, especially regarding labour costs in relation to turnover, goals that they can only achieve with a cooperative workforce or through increased self-exploitation. Aside from rhetorical departmentalism, less important shop-wide social activities, consisting of rare company dinners, were introduced only by the new French ownership. Instead, as part of a departmentalism approach, individualisation and informalisation of social relations at the shop floor are important, and facilitated by the small outlet size. There is strong rhetoric about individual voice and open door policies. Department heads also receive specific training on collective contracts and labour rights as a strategy to marginalise unions and shop stewards.

Despite these management strategies of marginalisation and individualisation, unions' in-house position is still relatively solid, building on a long history of collective labour relations. Unionisation, traditionally strong in this firm, reaches 60% in this outlet. It is far above the sector's average of 20%. Collective bargaining exists on the company as well as on the shop level. It is characterised by relatively conflictive approaches, at least in comparison to other stores, as several recent local strikes concerning work organisation and work times demonstrate. In other words, the current union strength is too high for management to practice complete, direct evasion strategies on the collective level. But, flexibilisation is clearly seen as an attack on both traditional labour standards and unions' power positions. Because, bargaining on flexibility regulations is bound to involve costly and painful concessions and compromises on labour's side, which reinforce the divide between well-protected older employees and more precarious newcomers. Moreover, flexibilisation impacts collective labour relations themselves. From the shop stewards' point of view, there is a problematic fragmentation of bargaining levels and issues. Thus, a return to localism is currently taking place. The latter is provoked by management's strategies to foster competition between shops and departments. In contrast to this decentralisation induced by management strategies, shop stewards perceive only limited support from the external union structures for their local struggles, especially when it comes to more controversial or confrontational bargaining. In other words, experiences of marginalisation also extend to active, strongly unionised workplaces when it comes to their position within the union hierarchies.

### 6.2.2 Firm C

Firm C is a hypermarket chain, taken over from an Italian property by the same French multinational as G in 2001. The two outlets in the sample, C1 and C2, have about 450 employees each. They are both situated in different shopping centres in the periphery of Milan. Regular shop openings are from Monday to Friday from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. and Saturdays until 9 p.m. As in G, there is an increasing number of irregular special Sunday openings.

In both shops, temporary contracts are used only to a limited extent and mainly take the form of seasonal employment. As in G, both shops currently do less temporary recruitment to replace absent colleagues. Even more pronounced than in G, one shop steward in C2 spoke of a complete hiring freeze due to management's imperative of cost reduction. Starting from a situation of relative 'over-staffing' with respect to the firm's turnover and profit goals, bit by bit these shops also reached a state of constant under-staffing. Unlike G, no training contracts exist in company C, which is the result of a recent union struggle. Unions fought against the use of 4-year training contracts as these were seen as a prolonged low paid testing period and a mechanism to substitute regular employment. While interim labour is an important source of flexibility to cover prolonged opening times in shop C1, it is nearly nonexistent in C2. In C1, this has been growing since 2003, reaching a rather stable number by the time of the interviews three years later. As an example, on Sundays, 25% of cashiers are interim workers. The most effective flexibility strategy in this case is using part-time labour, which constitutes the most common form of employment. The amount varies for different departments and tasks: It is most frequent for cashiers and sales clerks, but less for stock operators refilling the shelves on the shop floor. This is due to the quick turnover of goods and the resulting constant need for provisioning within a hypermarket. As typical for hypermarkets, promoters play an important role: In each of the three most concerned departments (perfumery, food, frozen food), about 40 promoters work alongside 50 to 60 regular employees per department. According to shop stewards, the resulting flexibility effects for the hypermarkets are limited, as promoters' work tasks would have been effectively restricted to their merchandising tasks for external companies. It took a successful union intervention to prevent management from using these workers to fill holes within the regular work organisation of the hypermarkets. Also in this firm, official work times follow cyclical, relatively stable but individualised shift patterns. Informal flexibility is achieved by means of short-term shift changes and overtime especially for part-timers. Formal functional flexibility is again very limited as employees are

contractually assigned to specific tasks in specific departments. Shop stewards in C2 consider management's attempts to informally increase functional flexibility to cover holes in staff coverage as highly problematic. Shop stewards in C1, in contrast, declare the actual possibilities for such short-term task variations to be limited, due to the required specific competences. In fact, whereas in the medium-size supermarket G, short-term functional variations are a frequent practice so that all employees are more or less familiar with all different tasks. This is much less the case in a hypermarket with its high personnel numbers. At the same time, large staff numbers make it easier to cover blank times within each department. In shops with smaller overall workforce numbers, instead, flexibility margins obtained by flexible allocation of work times are smaller and, thus, functional flexibility is more urgently needed. Where cross-department hole-tapping exists in C, it has a rather opposite effect as compared to G with cashiers being sent to support sales departments. This is due to the fact that turnover of goods, and consequently the work load related to replenishment, is much higher and more constant in a big hypermarket than in a supermarket.

In terms of labour control, C is very similar to G. It is characterised by a strong vertical hierarchy, limited official economic decentralisation, and strongly individualised labour relations. Rather than offering company-wide social activities and attempts to extend group formation beyond the workplace, corporate identity formation is based on informal interactions between employees and superiors on the department level, as well as on an explicit open door policy stipulating department heads as personal counsellors. In comparison to G, this aspect of individual voice and personal relations seems to be more pronounced in management's official rhetoric. This might be due to the bigger size of departments, making the development of a shared identity more difficult and demanding more encouragement of personal relations than in the medium-size supermarket G. In contrast to G, monthly public rankings exist in C, confronting not only departments but even individual groups within each department. In both companies, such corporate identity approaches are not a completely new policy. While effectively taking up the old concept of a firm-family, they have been enforced, individualised, and decentralised since the ownership changed to the French property.

In both firms, indirect control strategies are accompanied with rather strong direct, both open and hidden ('mysterious customers') supervision. This is primarily exercised on cashiers regarding their work speed and breaks. For sales clerks in G, in contrast, it seems to be reduced, leaving space for a relatively autonomous organisation of break times by employees themselves. This is definitely linked to the different organisational features of both tasks, but

it also reflects G's very informal daily work organisation. Indirect control through service 'training' is currently limited, though it has been more important in the past. In shop stewards' eyes, this is most of all a sign of management's cost reduction strategies, dominating over any attempts to enhance service quality. Consequently, all staff training in these cases is limited to learning by doing on the job.

As with G, C is a traditionally well unionised company and both share the same company-wide collective contract (second, firm level of bargaining). C2 has an especially high unionisation of about 70%. It is the traditional union stronghold within that company and was both the first hypermarket in the province of Milan and also the first unionised one when it was still in Italian ownership. Shop stewards here claim to have successfully avoided the typical generational workforce division between more and less precarious employees, which is common elsewhere. Also in shop G, shop stewards with some success explicitly try to integrate and mobilise younger employees for collective agency. But, in this case, according to shop stewards' own accounts, this does not prevent a generational split. Mobilisation largely concentrates on this younger workforce, while older employees mostly withdraw from any collective agency going beyond mere union membership.

Despite this strong union position, collective labour relations are in a bad state in C. Decline has apparently gone further than in G. Formal collective bargaining at the shop level has been practically nonexistent since the arrival of the French owners. While the most pressing issues for shop stewards are work times and opportunities for professional growth, negotiations actually only take place on an informal and personal basis and depend on the good-will of individual managers. Fragmentation of bargaining processes and the lowering of contract contents have become even more problematic with the company's nationwide diffusion. Consequently, rising regional differences in pay, work conditions, and unionisation are played out against each other, resulting in a process of assimilation towards the lower end. This decline of collective labour relations appears in both shops. As C1 has a weaker tradition of unionisation, the effects are even stronger here. Management's evasion strategy, including attempts to marginalise unions through individualisation, has led to a state of currently only unilateral decision making, with management rejecting any serious negotiations and compromises. In C2, in contrast, the strong traditional position of unions at least enables shop stewards to maintain informal personalised in-plant relations and negotiations. Nonetheless, they have lost their role as a vanguard pushing the development of collective labour relations

in the company as a whole. Instead, their more conflictive strategies end up as a minority position among the different outlets.

### 6.2.3 Firm I

Firm I is also a multinational company. In contrast to C, it has been operating in Italy since 1988, when it started out with its own greenfield shop openings. It is a specialised large scale retailer selling furniture. This shop has about 500 employees. Due to high numerical flexibility, this number varies constantly. The shop is situated in an industrial zone in the city's periphery. It is open weekdays from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. and Saturdays and Sundays from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. In contrast to the other cases, the only Sundays closed are five national holidays per year.

Flexible and part-time employment constitutes 70% of the workforce, while full-time and open-ended employment reaches 30%. To a large extent, flexible employment takes place on a part-time basis. 70% percent of the flexible employment consists of short-term temporary contracts, while 30% are accounted for through externalised contracts with interim agencies. Training contracts are only used to a limited extent. Unlike C, this is not due to union intervention but to management's choice, reflecting the flexibility reducing obligation to sign 4-year contracts. As a result of its large amount of short-term flexible employment, the shop experiences an extremely high staff turnover. In 2005, 280 employees passed through the shop, and already in the first half of 2006, management has issued 174 recruitment communications.

According to shop stewards, such an extensive use of short-term temporary employment is an old strategy of I's management. It aims at adapting workforce numbers to variations in customer affluence on a short-term basis, going beyond seasonal adjustments. Moreover, temporal employment functions as a prolonged test period. A 'successful test', however, is not followed by permanent employment. Instead, there is a frequent re-employment of the same temporary staff. In order to conform to the legal obligations of a maximum of two succeeding fixed-term contracts, employees must stay away for several weeks between one contract and another. Additional flexibility is achieved by management's recourse to informal, short-term changes in the amount of an individual employee's part-time hours. In this way, employees do not even need to be paid overtime supplements for additional hours. At the same time, flexibility is assured, as increases are only temporary and often not even fixed in a



signed contract. They can be revoked at any time. The passage from part-time to full-time employment, as in all other cases, is rather impossible on this backdrop.

Temporal flexibility is also strong in this case. As indicated above, the shop is open seven days a week, twelve hours each day. This results in a nearly continuous cycle of work shifts (including stock operations and replenishment) from 5 a.m. to 2 a.m. To cover this wide range with its differing work loads, work times have been extensively individualised and flexibilised. No collectively regulated shift patterns exist, not even for full-time employment. Instead, work days and hours vary for each individual employee and for each week and day. However, similar to G, shifts are arranged on the basis of a 12-week cycle, thus, formally adhering to part-time legislation on stable work times. In contrast to G, actual official shift patterns are much more irregular here. Consequently, there is less need from management's side to rely on overtime work and informal, spontaneous shift changes.

Similar to the other cases, formal functional flexibility does not exist, as employees have their specific individual tasks. According to shop stewards, management's attempts to increase flexibility informally by spontaneously calling employees up for short-term tasks in other departments are very limited. But, management has recently tried to formally introduce such flexibility. This has been countered by shop stewards with demands for restricting such additional flexibility to permanent employees and simultaneously increasing the hours of part-time staff. At the time of the interviews, negotiations on this issue were still going on.

Regarding labour control, hidden supervision, control over service interactions, as well as increasing a sense of responsibility and normative control, appear to be stronger than in C and G. For sales clerks and cashiers, there is a computer based control system in place, controlling their work speed.<sup>173</sup> Clearly, control over service interactions is focussed on turnover and cost reduction rather than on service quality. Though, stress is put on employees' appearance, too. There is a strict dress code, including a firm uniform and obligations of 'orderly', clean dressing, and hair styles. Such rules exist in the other cases, too. But, here they are graphically displayed on a poster near the staff's entrance to the shop floor. This is accompanied by a mirror to encourage self-control.

Also in I, formal economic decentralisation concerns only the level of department heads. As in G, even this limited decentralisation appears to have strong effects on ordinary employees. Shop stewards see department heads' responsibility for turnover-related expenditure goals and

---

<sup>173</sup> Officially, individual control at a distance is forbidden by labour law. But, according to shop stewards, it takes place every day. It would be rendered possible through the misuse of employees' personal passwords for intranet-use, codes which are assigned by management in the first place.

managing work times and staff numbers as a central driving force behind the company's strong flexibilisation dynamics. In addition, management's attempts to foster all employees' responsibility for positive financial results appear to be more systematic. There are annual shop-wide assemblies and regular meetings at the department level in which economic results are presented. There also is a light form of total quality management in place, as employees are expected and encouraged to give their opinion on work process and possible ameliorations in these meetings. Economic incentives are established by means of performance related pay bonuses. These depend on company's overall results and are paid to all employees with contracts of more than three months. Besides cultivating a sense of responsibility for economic success, stress is put on corporate identity and the work atmosphere. The company publishes an annual report on the company atmosphere and success based on employee questionnaires. It includes a ranking of all the company's shops, reflecting not only economic results, but also employee satisfaction. While participation is voluntary and anonymous, shop stewards report about strong pressures exercised on employees to fill out the questionnaires, as well as management's attempts to retrace negative answers. In addition to informal, individualised relations between employees and superiors, more frequent social activities take place, also in the form of dinners and parties on the department level.

The outlet from company considered in this study, again, is a traditional union stronghold, representing one of the most rebellious factions within that company. In comparison to G and C, unionisation has reached 'only' 25%. This can be considered a lot for specialised large scale retailing, given the high amount of flexible employment. Shop stewards present themselves as particularly active trying to integrate and mobilise not necessarily young but temporary colleagues, and to make precarisation an issue within collective interest representation. However, as in C and G, participation in union assemblies and elections is high, but only for permanent staff.

Also in this case, the management tries to marginalise unions by means of individualised labour relations, anti-union pressures exercised on temporary employees, and an evasion strategy regarding collective bargaining. Management's unwillingness to negotiate is reflected in the difficulties to renew the company-wide collective contract. The last process of renewal took more than 1 ½ years.<sup>174</sup> Moreover, management tries to exclude newly opened shops from the application of the existing collective contract. Shop stewards describe the new contract, signed in 2006, as a union victory. It establishes a minimum of 20 hours for part-

---

<sup>174</sup> Such relatively long negotiation periods are a common feature in Milanese large scale retailing.

time contracts, to be realised in 2007 for permanent and in 2008 for temporary employees. In addition, it achieved an increase in professional and pay levels for some categories of specialised workers. Compromises were agreed upon with regard to Sunday work (maximum of 39 Sundays per year and 10 in succession) and minimum standards for the use of interim labour. Yet, all in all, shop stewards perceive a strong weakening of unions and their own positions. This concerns both the company as a whole, and this specific shop, in spite of its strong and rebellious union tradition. This loss of power finds its expression also in the regulations concerning collective interest representation: The new contract introduces a previously nonexistent fixed limited amount of free hours for shop stewards.

#### 6.2.4 Firm D

As I, D is a specialised large scale retailer, with various outlets opened in Italy by a foreign multinational company in 1993. It sells sports equipment and sports clothes. Each of the three considered outlets in the sample has about 100 employees, while there are up to 200 people working in the centralised stocks varying with more or less busy periods. The shops are open Monday to Saturday from 9 a.m. to 8, 9 or 10 p.m., depending on each outlet. Sundays are officially only open for special occasions, but actually such openings occur at least once a month.

Aside from the stocks, no union representation exists in this company. It was a lot more difficult to obtain any numbers regarding employment contracts here compared to the other cases. It appears that shops run with a very small stock of permanent employees, mostly hired with the shop opening or shortly after. The rest of the workforce is employed on a temporary basis, either with seasonal contracts of few months, or unlike I, with the usual 4-year training contracts, or through interim agencies. Phases of unstable employment for individual employees are particularly long, as often 4-year training contracts are assigned only after the maximum legal period of normal fixed-term contracts or interim employment has been fully used. The latter form of employment externalisation is especially important in the stocks. To give a quantitative example, the stocks have a regular, constant workforce of about 100 people, including permanent employment as well as fixed-term 4-year contracts of training and ‘insertion contracts’.<sup>175</sup> During periods of high sales, employment numbers double to 200.

---

<sup>175</sup> ‘Insertion contracts’ or ‘contratti di inserimento’ are similar to training contracts in terms of their fixed-term and reduced payment conditions. Originally, they were created as an instrument of labour market policies, to

This rise is mostly covered by interim labour. As in I, it is a deliberate strategy of management to employ a young workforce, especially students, seen as more prone to accept contractual as well as work time flexibility. Finally, as in the other cases, part-time employment is the vast majority, except for the stocks with its more regular work loads.

Work time flexibility is equally high. Shifts are set six weeks in advance, without following any stable collectively regulated patterns nor, unlike I, any formalised individual cycles. The result is daily varying shifts, both in placement and length. This is the only case where flexibility and elasticity clauses are used extensively in order to legalise this extreme flexibility, without covering it up by any formal regulations. Instead of specific work times, individual labour contracts state that ‘everybody manages his/her own work times’. As in the other cases, shifts are strongly individualised but hierarchically set by department heads. On this backdrop, overtime seems to play a reduced role while additional spontaneous shift changes exist nonetheless. Depending on the attitude of specific superiors, this flexibility pattern appears to leave some more space for actual renegotiations of work times by individual employees than in the other companies.

Functional flexibility exists only on an informal level, which is particular important in this case. While horizontal shifts to other departments or areas of work occur less frequently, flexibility takes the form of a vertical transfer of responsibilities from higher functions to employees on officially lower qualification and pay levels. Individually chosen employees are assigned additional work tasks and responsibilities within their same area of work. This is similar to G, but it happens in a more continuous way. For example, selected cashiers are given responsibilities to constantly manage work time schedules in their department, or to contribute in the selection of new workforce for their area.

Regarding indirect labour control and subjectification, the situation is similar to firm I. While, official economic decentralisation reaches only the level of department heads, responsabilisation of single employees passes through regular shop and department assemblies and communications of the firm’s economic results and goals. On the department level, such meetings take place each day at the beginning of the morning shift, and are also used to distribute the day’s work. As in I and C, public rankings exist between departments and shops. Shop floor relations between employees and superiors are characterised by a strong rhetoric of individual voice, friendly relations, and informal direct interaction. As in all other three

---

foster labour market (re-)entrance for employees above the age limit set for training contracts, either in search of a first employment position, or already aged above 40 years.

cases, superiors are addressed by an informal 'tu' and the first name. Additionally, individualisation and responsabilisation are underlined by regular individualised performance evaluations. These take the form of formalised face to face interviews with direct superiors, in which employees have to fill in questionnaires about their work situation, related satisfaction and problems. Especially, personal development goals are established and evaluated over time. These performance evaluations are most strongly used in the centralised stocks, reflecting its strategic position for the whole commercial process, and thus the crucial character of workforce alignment especially among warehouse workers. In the stocks, different forms of interviews exist both on a monthly and a yearly basis, while these are scheduled for the outlets only once a year. As interviews from this study with employees revealed, these are actually carried out even less frequently in the shops.

Emphasis is also put on a company-wide corporate identity. This is particularly fostered through various social activities, including not only firm dinners but also weekend trips, cultural, and sports events. The latter also serve as a sort of training in the firm's field of specialisation as a sports and outdoor retailer. These performance evaluations, social activities, as well as all other forms of existing but still limited job training, are confined to the permanent workforce. In I, in contrast, corporate identity initiatives are also and particularly pointed at temporary employees.

Direct control appears to be less systematic than in I. In the absence of any computerised control system, it is mostly delegated to the discretion of direct superiors. But, even beyond this level, social control among colleagues seems to be high, reflecting management's strategies to create internal competition and to make employees feel as responsible firm actors. All in all, at least at the level of rhetoric, the attention paid by management on service quality seems to be higher than in the other cases – though it still results in standardised requirements for employees' behaviour in interactions with customers.

In sharp contrast to the other cases, collective labour relations are practically nonexistent in this company. At the time of interviewing, shop stewards were elected for the first time only recently (in 2004) and only in the centralised stocks, while unions still struggled to enter in the outlet points. Accordingly, neither a collective contract on the company level, nor any formal agreements on the local level for the stocks exist. Nonetheless, the firm is bound to the national sector collective contract of trade and commerce. In the stocks, the management has introduced an internal body of workforce representation and conflict settlement. Within this structure, concessions to employee demands are made only on an informal level through

unilateral management decisions. In the absence of any binding contractual obligations, these appear as ‘grants’ that can be revoked at any time. Negotiations between shop stewards and the management, instead, have remained without any official results so far. Shop stewards are effectively marginalised by this mechanism. Consequently, they feel forced to constantly reduce their demands in the hope of reaching at least some formal agreement.

### 6.2.5 Case comparison

On the basis of the so far effectuated case studies the initial rough distinction of different management strategies of flexibilisation and work organisation (which served as basis for case selection in a first place) can now be specified. Considering all four cases, G and C are similar with regard to flexibility as well as labour control. Both have limited formal flexibility, but high indirect numerical flexibility based on part-time plus overtime and important informal temporal flexibility arrangements achieved through spontaneous short-term changes in official shifts. On the level of labour control, they display limited formal strategies of decentralisation, responsabilisation, and corporate identity formation. Responsibilisation and firm culture pass in a more informal way through direct informal and personalised interactions between employees and superiors at the department level. This induces an individualisation of labour relations and flexibility regulations. Especially in firm C, it is combined with a management rhetoric of individual voice. While unionisation is above the sector’s average in both firms – with variations depending on the concrete outlet – unions’ power positions in collective bargaining are weakening considerably in both cases. In G, shop stewards still manage to set bargaining agendas and to reach formal agreements, whereas in C, collective labour relations are largely reduced to informal negotiations with topics and times unilaterally decided by management.

Companies I and D, in turn, are similar with their high degree of both formal and informal flexibility, comprising an extensive use of temporary, interim, and part-time employment, as well as flexible, individualised formal shift patterns. Informal temporal flexibility patterns assume a different shape in both firms, as they are mostly based on spontaneous shift changes in firm D versus informal temporary variations in individual employees’ part-time hours in firm I. Indirect control and subjectification are high in both cases. They rely on extensive management initiatives to foster corporate identity formation – sophisticated social events in D versus annual monitoring of firm atmosphere in I – and on formal responsabilisation through regular firm and department meetings as well as performance related pay bonuses. As

in the other cases, but especially strong in D, these initiatives are supplemented by an individualisation of labour relations and flexibility negotiations (including individualised performance evaluations in firm D). This is reflected, finally, by informal, direct, personalised interactions between superiors and employees, and by a strong open door policy of individual voice. As to collective labour relations, I and D differ strongly. D is clearly the least developed case in this sample with practically nonexistent union representation, no collective company contract nor local shop-level agreements. There is a strong marginalisation of shop stewards in the stocks through the described mechanism of internal workforce representation. In contrast, I, though demonstrating a weaker degree of unionisation, shares with G the situation of weakened but still strong and confrontational positions in collective bargaining, maintaining in-shop negotiations and achieving compromised formal agreements.

*Table 10: Unionisation and bargaining power in the four case studies*

	<b>Informal flexibilisation and subjectification</b>	<b>Formal and informal flexibilisation and subjectification</b>
<b>Low unionisation and bargaining power</b>		D
<b>Important unionisation but marginalised bargaining positions</b>	C	
<b>High unionisation and weakening but still existing bargaining power</b>	G	I

Beyond this classification into two flexibility and control related groups, direct labour control appears important in all cases, though differing in its precise shape. It is focussed on hidden, computerised supervision in I versus open control exercised on the department level by superiors, combined with strong social control among colleagues themselves in D. In G and C, strict hierarchies are combined with both hidden and open supervision.

Functional flexibility takes an informal shape in all four cases. It is less important in I and partly in C. In D, it consists of constant vertical transfers of responsibilities from higher to lower positions in the shop hierarchy versus only short-term shifts between different tasks and departments in G and C.

Finally, despite the differences in precise flexibility and control regimes, current issues of collective bargaining are similar in all cases. The most important topics clearly are the

stabilisation of work times, hour increases for part-timers, and increases in qualification levels for specialists. Only in D, in its centralised stocks, the most contentious issues are wage increases, too difficult to achieve performance related pay bonuses, and the payment of wage supplements for night and holiday work. Also in this case, however, work and break times are conflictive topics, with high flexibility requirements versus strict control over punctuality as simultaneous problems.

*Table 11a: Formal and informal flexibilisation and subjectification in G and C*

	<b>G</b>	<b>C</b>
<b>Flexibility arrangements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• limited formal (seasonal and training contracts), but strong indirect (part-time based) numerical flexibility</li> <li>• low formal but strong informal, temporal and functional flexibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• low formal (seasonal and interim labour), but indirect (part-time based) numerical flexibility</li> <li>• low formal but strong informal temporal flexibility</li> <li>• low functional flexibility</li> </ul>
<b>Labour control and subjectification</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• limited formal decentralisation and corporate identity initiative formation</li> <li>• strong informal responsabilisation at department level, through informal personalised direct shop floor interactions with superiors and individualised labour relations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• limited formal decentralisation and actual corporate identity initiatives</li> <li>• strong informal responsabilisation and firm culture rhetoric at department level, informal personalised direct shop floor interactions with superiors and individualised labour relations</li> </ul>
<b>Unionisation and collective labour relations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• important union tradition with high degree of unionisation (60%)</li> <li>• weakening, but still strong and confrontational formal collective labour relations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• important union tradition with medium to high unionisation (up to 70%, depending on each shop)</li> <li>• strong loss of bargaining power due to management strategies of evasion, informal, and unilateral labour relations</li> </ul>



*Table 11b: Formal and informal flexibilisation and subjectification in I and D*

	<b>I</b>	<b>D</b>
<b>Flexibility arrangements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• high formal (temporary contracts) and indirect (part-time based) numerical flexibility</li> <li>• high formal and informal temporal flexibility</li> <li>• low functional flexibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• high formal (temporary and training contracts plus interim labour) and indirect (part-time based) numerical flexibility</li> <li>• high formal and informal temporal flexibility</li> <li>• high informal functional flexibility</li> </ul>
<b>Labour control and subjectification</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• strong formal and informal subjectification, including responsabilisation, normative control through corporate identity formation, and individualised, informal, personalised labour relations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• strong formal and informal subjectification, including responsabilisation, normative control through corporate identity formation, and individualised, informal, personalised labour relations</li> </ul>
<b>Unionisation and collective Labour relations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• important union tradition with medium unionisation (25%)</li> <li>• weakening, but still strong and confrontational formal collective labour relations</li> </ul>	<p>very low to nonexistent unionisation (only stocks)</p> <p>completely marginalised bargaining position, no collective contract or local agreements</p>

## 7. Individual work experiences and fields of conflict

The following three chapters examine how employees experience and cope with challenging work conditions. This builds on the previous chapter's analysis about management strategies of labour control and increasing flexibilisation, which has been leading to an informal and individualised modus of flexibility regulations. This analytical task is accomplished in three major steps:

In chapter seven, employees' daily experiences of conflicts and contradictions at the workplace are discussed. Emphasis is placed on the role that management's strategies of flexibilisation and subjectification have on such conflicts. Not only openly fought struggles are considered, but all sorts of latent conflicts that are experienced by employees and expressed in the interviews as disagreements and dissatisfaction with specific aspects of their work conditions. Focussing on the description of workplace conflicts is not meant to narrow the analysis down to negative experiences of work and flexibilisation. Instead, the aim is to highlight contradictions and tensions inherent in current transformations of work and employment as well as in employees' experiences of these changes. Taking conflict experiences as a point of departure for the analysis of employees' coping practices and action potential follows directly from the analytical setting of this research, rooted in labour process theory. As Burawoy puts it, a critical sociology of labour first of all requires a theory and an understanding of workplace conflict and consent. Conflict at the workplace is neither simply structural, underlying, inevitable, nor an irrational deviation of any assumed normal state of harmony. Instead, it has to be analysed in its concrete forms as immediate outcomes of specific labour processes, located in particular historical social contexts.<sup>176</sup>

Building on the analysis of conflict experiences, employees' agency can be understood in its ambiguous form as an equally productive and reproductive force. It emerges as a coping practice: Reacting to and enacting given work conditions and their conflicts, and at the same time, appropriating, rejecting, and changing these conditions. These coping practices are analysed in two further chapters. First, employees' individual coping practices, the way they react to, live with, and make sense of experienced conflicts, is in the centre of attention in chapter eight. The presentation of conflict fields (in chapter seven) already refers to employees' meaning constructions, as these are associated with the articulation of work experiences and their description as having a more or less conflictive character. But, it is only

---

<sup>176</sup> Burawoy 1979: 12: "Conflict and consent are neither latent nor underlying but refer to directly observable activities that must be grasped in terms of the organisation of the labour process under capitalism."

in chapter 8 that a detailed, critical analysis of these meaning constructions is undertaken, which looks at employees' common sense and how it functions as a means of coping.

Second, beyond employees' individual reactions to conflicts, chapter nine discusses the role, form, and subjective relevance of collective coping practices. These cover shop floor solidarity, as well as participation in collective interest representation and the development of a collective consciousness. At both of these levels of individual and collective coping practices, my interest lies in the kind and degree of action potential that employees develop in the face of experienced conflicts and work requirements: This includes their capacities to deal with conflicts, to cope with work requirements, but also to realise their own interests and change their work conditions.

This chapter distinguishes between two main potential fields of conflict stemming from the analysis of current transformations: flexibilisation of work and employment as well as labour control and particularly its subjectification. Beyond this division, the analysis highlights the connections between experiences of flexibilisation, precarisation, subjectification, and individualisation of labour relations. Consequently, upcoming conflicts and issues apparently not directly related to processes of flexibilisation or new patterns of labour control are also taken into consideration. This is done to better grasp these linkages, to gain a thorough understanding of today's work realities as seen from employees' eyes, and to question the role and relevance of flexibility requests and self-regulation for employees' overall conflict experiences.<sup>177</sup> It will become clear from employees' accounts that there are no experiences of flexibility as such. Instead, these are always located within their regulatory context, i.e. linked to the issue of labour control and the resulting concrete modus of flexibility regulations.

With respect to employees' experiences, the informal and individualised modus of flexibility regulations described in the last chapter translate into a mechanism of forced availability. As will be shown, this results in generalised though gradual experiences of precarisation that touch upon all groups of employees, be they on temporary or permanent, part-time or full-time contracts. Not least as a consequence of these experiences of forced availability and precarisation, participatory management strategies, as well as employees own desires for participation and self-determination, become a second central, equally generalised field of conflict.

---

<sup>177</sup> For this purpose, a mix of open questions asking about work experiences, positive and negative aspects of work, and any kinds of conflicts were used in the interviews together with a guideline addressing issues of flexibilisation and subjectification. The latter was employed to deepen employees' accounts or raise these issues where they were not mentioned by the employees themselves.

Significant differences in the degree and form of conflict experiences in these various fields can be found among the firms in this sample, resulting from case specific forms of management strategies of flexibilisation control. In addition, they can be attributed to employee characteristics, namely to differences in employment histories, age, and gender.

## ***7.1 Employee experiences of flexibilisation and precarisation***

### **7.1.1 Conflicts regarding the employment status: Experiences of flexibilisation and precarisation**

As was discussed in the literature review, flexibility is usually differentiated into its numerical, temporal, and functional aspects, impacting employment contracts, work times, and tasks. As the analysis here shows, in employees' experiences, these three levels of flexibilisation are closely interlinked.

The first step is to look at the employment status as a potential field of conflict. This requires referring to more than just employment flexibility. Instead, the term employment status is used to reflect that employees' experiences of flexibilisation go beyond the question of temporary versus permanent contracts. In fact, these experiences equally touch upon the issues of contractual hours (part-time versus full-time), qualifications, and wage levels.<sup>178</sup> In addition, flexibilisation effects the work process itself, the overall work conditions, and the extent and limits of labour requirements.

The most frequent complaint expressed during the interviews concerned the fact that the employment status is widely experienced as precarious. This appears, first of all, in the original sense of the word: in terms of uncertain, insecure, unstable, and insufficient conditions of existence. Such precarisation is generated by contractual instability and uncertainty as well as by the insufficiency of low wages. This is definitely no new or surprising outcome, at least with regard to temporary employment and taking into account the low wage level in the Italian retail industry. Yet, what is interesting here is that such precarisation, in employees' accounts, is not primarily linked to temporary employment. Temporary contracts seem quite accepted for transition periods, although they are often

---

<sup>178</sup> The employment status is meant here to comprise all contract related features of the employment relation. These also include the degree of access to social security schemes. However, this does not emerge as a relevant, conflictive issue from the interviews as all interviewees, aside from the only agency worker in the sample, do have regularly 'subordinate' employment contracts including payment of social security contributions and access to respective protections – as far as these exist in the Italian context. Regarding the side of management, the employment status is relevant for a firm's flexibilisation strategies on all three levels of numerical, temporal, and functional flexibility.

experienced as precarious in terms of future employment and income prospects.<sup>179</sup> The following two quotes, however, express both these contrasting experiences of stressful temporary employment and its acceptance as a transition period.

*Marco: When I started working here, for the first month, I had weekly contracts with an interim agency. Then I got a six month contract directly with firm D. And then they hired me on a permanent basis, full-time. (...) This has been like a test period. I didn't really live it as stressful. It was just like a test period. And I knew that I was doing a good job, that I was working hard and that I gave all availability, and that I had the necessary experience for this job (Marco/permanent full-time contract, stock operator, firm D).*

*Chiara: I've had four or five seasonal contracts, each of them for 3 or 4 months. This went on for a year and a half or so. And then, they just left us at home. That's been really hard. Between all these contracts there has always been a two week break in which you were left at home, and only then you got the new contract.<sup>180</sup> Also at the last one we hoped it would be like this. But instead I've been at home for a year. They'd even told us before: 'Don't worry, we will call you back in'. (...) This period with temporary contracts has been a really bad time. You just never know whether you will get the next contract or not. You are always afraid not to do any mistakes. And also for overtime hours, you just always accept them, because you are afraid that maybe they could not give you a new contract. Seasonal employment really means fear (Chiara/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C1).<sup>181</sup>*

While the second interview passage points to the problematic experience of insecurity, criticism in the whole interview does not address the fact that such temporary contracts exist in the first place. Temporary employment is seen as a bad, difficult period, but as long as it functions as a stepping stone to permanent employment it is taken as a given. In employees' perceptions, it simply has to be endured to gain a permanent contract. Real critique arises only when, at the end, employment stabilisation is negated. The perception of temporary employment as a transition period directly limits the potential for conflict that these contracts gain in employees' records. This is obviously facilitated as all permanent employees in this

---

<sup>179</sup> I will not go into detail regarding such experiences of precarisation which are directly and only focused on the uncertainty of temporary contracts in terms of future employment. This issue has been discussed by a vast literature on employment flexibilisation and precarisation (see chapter three). Instead, it is highlighted here how experiences of precarisation are linked to further aspects of the employment status, the work organisation, and labour control. As this sample contains only a minority of current temporary employees and a majority of ex-temporary employees with current permanent part- or full-time positions, it reveals itself as particularly apt to have such a shift and enlargement of the research focus.

<sup>180</sup> This strategy is used by management to circumvent the legislation on temporary employment, which in 2006 allowed for only two temporary contracts following each other. With a break of at least ten days (twenty days if the contracts are for more than six months) these contracts are not considered consecutive any longer.

<sup>181</sup> All interviews in this study were conducted in Italian. All quoted interview passages provided have been translated from Italian into English by the author.

sample have successfully reached stabilisation from temporary to open-ended employment within their current job. Finally, the latter quote links experiences of uncertainty and fear not only to future employment prospects, but also to everyday work conditions and especially work time flexibility in terms of overtime.

Much more despised, instead, appears to be permanent part-time employment. For a majority of interviewees, part-time employment is involuntary, mostly due to the low wages it provides (between 400€ and 500€ for 24 hours per week). In a city like Milan with rents for a single room in the city's periphery of at least 350€ per month, it is impossible to make a living from such part-time employment.<sup>182</sup> All interviewees in this position either still live with their parents or rely on the income from a partner and/or have additional jobs. And, above all, they rely on doing overtime hours in order to increase their monthly income.

*Daniele: A secure job is only a full-time job, with a permanent contract. But, as long as you are part-time... Some of my colleagues can't pay for their own apartment, they can't marry, they just don't make it, it's difficult with these wages. I did this sacrifice (to buy a small apartment). But I do not like this situation. Because, very often, I just have to accept any overtime hours they offer. Because, at the end of the month, I need to have enough money to pay the credit for the apartment. (...) Each month it's like this, I never know whether I will make it until the end of the month with the money. I do offer my availability; if they need me, they call me in (Daniele/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm G).*

Besides a few exceptions of voluntary part-time,<sup>183</sup> most interviewees aspire to increase their contractual hours. They consider their current part-time position not only as a temporary state, but also as an unstable and uncertain situation. This is due to two reasons: First, neither the amount nor the temporal allocation of overtime hours is assured in advance, and depending on them creates instability and uncertainty of monthly incomes and work times – as expressed in the last quote. Second, formal increases of contractual work hours are uncertain and difficult to obtain, given management's strategies of cost reduction and part-time based flexibility.

Nonetheless, it should be underlined that full-time employment is far from always being seen as an aspired ideal employment. In employees' eyes it rather appears as an economic necessity. While even voluntary part-timers mention the problem of low, insufficient wages,

---

<sup>182</sup> Due to the high rents it is common to buy an apartment instead of renting it. But, this obviously also requires a monthly mortgage payment. And prices for houses are equally high.

<sup>183</sup> Other reasons for such voluntary part-time work, above all, are family duties, or a life style giving priority to extra-work interests and/or a positive approach to flexibility as allowing for a 'bricolage' of jobs and employment biography.

part-time employment is valued for its reduced temporal impact on life and leisure times also by those aspiring to increase the amount of hours they work.

Future uncertainty and current insufficiency of income is also expressed by permanent full-time employees. For them, conflicts with regard to the employment status arise from a low current wage, but also from the experience of being blocked over time in low qualifications and wage levels. Exemplifying this experience, the following quote points towards a further, frequent form of informal functional flexibility: The assignment of additional, more specialised tasks without formally recognising them in terms of qualification and wage levels.

*Eric: I am full-time now. I worked for 4 and a half years at the fresh fish counter. There, I did lots of things which would have belonged to a higher qualification, to a higher wage level. But they never gave me a higher level. So, one day I engaged in legal action against the firm. But I lost it. (...) Then I refused doing these things which didn't belong to my wage level. And now they did put me back to the cash desk, where I was in the beginning. (...) If you do not see any possibility of growth, well, then it doesn't make sense to do this effort. It's a hard job, you know, for the cold, and the ice you have to touch with your hands (Eric /permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

Discontent with lacking career prospects also exists among part-time employees:

*Mario: Once, if you did a good job and all that, one day you might have become department head. But now, now you do not even see this as a possibility anymore. As far as I see, nobody here does. And even those who could actually make it, they don't do it. Because, they increase your responsibility enormously, disproportionally. But your wage remains nearly the same, just some 100, 200€ more. Given the situation as it is by now, in your department there might be nobody to work on Sundays. If you are the head, you have to go and work. If nobody else is willing to do so, and the shop maybe remains open all 4 Sundays in a month, then you have to work all Sundays (Mario/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

Interestingly, lacking prospects for growth are linked not only to difficulties of advancing in the shop hierarchy, but also to the equal precarisation of immediately higher, reachable positions. This experience of blocked professional growth renders any future income growth, as well as the prospects of skill and self-development uncertain, and thus, potentially also employees' work identities. Across employees with different types of contracts, perceptions of lacking labour market alternatives add to such an experience of being trapped in what many in the beginning considered only as a transitional employment position. Employees' accounts reflect the sector's trend to turn from a predominantly transitional labour market for young

people in their first employment position into a place of continuous employment also for a qualified workforce with higher educational degrees. Given the lack of alternatives, especially students stick to retail jobs even after having finished their studies.

In sum, employees in these interviews complain about their employment status not only because of contractual flexibility, resulting instability, and uncertainty of future employment and income. In addition, they raise concerns about insufficiently low and insecure monthly incomes, as well as uncertainty and lacking upward mobility in terms of professional growth (regarding both their income and qualifications). Even where dissatisfaction is not explicitly referred to as precarisation, employees' complaints clearly reflect negative experiences of growing and/or continuous instability, uncertainty, and insecurity about their employment status. From an analytical perspective, all these aspects should be interpreted as processes of precarisation.

Moreover, these observations also apply to the concerns expressed by permanent employees. Overall, the interviews show widespread, though gradual experiences of precarisation. In this, the generalisation takes two dimensions: a) covering a broad range of different aspects of the employment relation and going beyond its direct flexibilisation in terms of contract duration; and b) the tendency of impacting all of the various contract-defined groups of employees, though in different forms and to different extents. This generalised, gradual character of precarisation processes is further traced and differentiated (see especially chapter 7.3.1). The next sections first take a closer look on how the everyday experiences of employees are linked to processes of flexibilisation and subjectification at the level of the work organisation.

### **7.1.2 The conflicts of individualised informal flexibility regulations: Precarising experiences of forced availability**

On first glance, the experiences of precarisation described in this section might not necessarily seem to be connected to processes of flexibilisation. But upon closer consideration, they are closely linked to the modus by which flexibility is regulated at the level of the daily work organisation. What is more, interviewees' experiences of their employment status as precarious effects their evaluations of the labour process and its regulation by means of labour control. On the backdrop of these experiences, in fact, the individualised informal modus of flexibility regulations turns into a mechanism of forced availability.



As mentioned before, temporal flexibility in all four companies is to a large extent achieved by a combination of part-time employment with overtime work and spontaneous adjustments of pre-established, more or less regular shift patterns. Consequently the firm relies to a large extent on part-timers' readiness to accept overtime hours and shift changes not foreseen in their labour contracts in order to manage daily flexibility requirements. Such readiness is widely present for two reasons: First, employees have a vital interest in increasing their income by working extra hours. Second, there are no fixed, collective rules for the allocation of overtime hours. Instead, available overtime hours are distributed according to an individualising logic of 'merit'. This does not only increase uncertainty, but exposes employees to strong, though often only indirect, coercion. Individual 'merits' are measured by the frequency with which employees have previously agreed to the firm's requests for flexibility and availability. Anyone who does not, risks being overlooked in future allocations of extra hours. In addition, he or she obtains less favourable responses to his or her own flexibility needs (such as days off or shift changes) in individual negotiations with superiors.

*Eric: They do not really oblige you to do them. They put it more in terms of availability: 'Listen, could you do these overtime hours..., there is no obligation, it's just a proposal...'. But, if you say 'no', just once, two or three times maybe, they won't even ask you anymore at all if you want to do any overtime. Because, for them, you would have proved being a not reliable person. They already put the cross on you. They won't ask you anymore. Or, maybe, they do it like this: 'Oh, yes, you would need to take one of your allowance days,<sup>184</sup> a day off this Saturday? No, sorry, but you can't take it during the weekend, there are too many customers then.' (...) You see, they pay it back to you in this way, they spite on you. Because you have not been available enough. The day before doesn't count anything. Maybe you've said 13 times 'yes, yes, yes', and then, for once, you say 'no'. For them it's all over then, for them you've always said 'no' (Eric/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

The same logic of 'merit' is also at work with regard to employment stabilisation, increases in contractual hours, qualification and pay levels, the assignment of (more or less disliked) work tasks and times, or any other aspect of daily work conditions.

*Mario: Well, the other years, the first two years (with temporary contracts), yes, I've always been available. When they asked you to come back in the afternoon, after your regular work time, to discharge the truck. I did not really live it as an order, I also accepted when it suited me. But, then, when sometimes maybe I did refuse to work on Sundays, well then the others told me: 'Be careful, they take*

---

<sup>184</sup> Beyond normal holidays, employees are entitled to a certain number of paid free days during the year, which might be used for medical visits, exams, or other personal needs.

*account of this when it comes to renew your contract' (Mario/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

As can be seen from the next quotes, employees feel forced to constantly demonstrate unlimited availability to their management's requests. They easily become vulnerable to what they themselves voice as blackmailing.

*Cristian: Management uses these methods for blackmailing. Even now, to some extent, I still feel it, with regard to overtime, work times, Sundays, and so on. Firms frequently use all this to make employees psychologically feel unwell. Not mobbing, but we are close to it, especially for those with temporary contracts (Cristian/permanent full-time contract, salesclerk, firm C2).*

Allegedly, the choice to work overtime and to demonstrate the requested availability to a firm's demands is left to the employees. Acceptance of overtime hours and spontaneous shift changes is officially 'voluntary'. In this way, responsibility for work conditions is assigned to employees themselves, while the realisation of one's own needs and interests becomes conditioned to the internalisation and self-responsible management of the firm's flexibility requests.

This is all the more the case due to the absence of formalised measurements for such 'merits'. And even where some of the issues at stake are fixed by collective rules, this has become undermined by a process of individualisation and informalisation of labour relations. In contrast, the definition of 'merit' is open to the arbitrary decision-making power of superiors, not least based on personal preferences and/or used for disciplinary reasons. Under these conditions, favourable responses to employees' needs and demands turn into a 'granting of favours'. Whereas, establishing good personal relations with superiors becomes a vital resource for employees to deal with experiences of precarisation and to face informal individualised flexibility regulations. On the other side, affect – in the form of personal preferences of superiors, influencing judgements on individuals' merit – comes to constitute not only an object, but also a device of labour control.

In sum, management's flexibilisation strategies are put into practice by means of blackmailing. This is facilitated by precarisation processes: As described above, blackmailing is based on employees precarious status with regard to employment contracts, wages, and professional growth perspectives, and what is more, on their precarious position within a system of

individualised informal labour relations that makes them dependent on positive ‘availability scores’ and good personal relations with superiors.

In employees’ accounts of work realities, the dominant experience and criticism of blackmailing does not imply that they would be against any kind of flexibility or that they would not be able to appropriate and take some profit from the system of individualised informal flexibility regulations. Yet, it indicates and underlines the unequal distribution of power resources, which sets the backdrop for any potential struggles over flexibility, its risks and opportunities.

So far, the analysis has outlined the prevalence of informal and individualised flexibility regulations exerted on employees as a way to force them to be available, based on the threat of blackmailing. Moreover, it highlighted that employees’ experiences of a precarious employment status are linked to questions of work organisation (regarding temporal flexibility and skill development) as well as labour control (in terms of requirements of self-regulation, individualisation and informalisation, and an overall authoritarian workplace regime). Thus, such experiences of precarisation effectively go beyond the issue of contractual flexibility or stability. The analysis now proceeds by taking a more detailed look at the precise character of conflicts developing in these additional fields. The following sections particularly deal with (a) work times, (b) work tasks and qualifications, and (c) direct and indirect forms of labour control.

### 7.1.3 In detail: Conflicts regarding work times

Observing work time flexibility in the daily work organisation, informal flexibility arrangements appear to be the most controversial issue. Conflict lines clearly reflect the main lines of management’s flexibilisation strategies. Employees complain about uncertain overtime hours (mentioned in nine interviews as a field of conflict), spontaneous shift changes (highly conflictive in three interviews), as well as prolonging daily unpaid work time (appears as a central conflict in two interviews). The latter touches mostly upon cashiers, regarding the time they need to open and close their desks and attend to the last customers.

It is precisely the informality of flexibility arrangements that fosters employees’ experiences of forced availability, as well as their discontent with insecure monthly incomes and unstable work times. Especially problematic is the tension between these economic and temporal sides of instability. Economic uncertainty and insufficiency of monthly incomes pushes part-time employees to take up additional secondary jobs. At the same time, unstable work times limits

their ability to effectively combine multiple jobs. Yet, it is not necessarily the flexibility of work times that is the object of employees' critique, but the often extremely short notice that is given for overtime requests or shift changes.

*André: They asked me just today if I could come back in the afternoon. They were getting on my nerves. You know, from time to time I go work with a friend of mine who is a tinter, to earn some extra money, to make it to the end of the month. You can't just ask me in the morning to come back to work that same afternoon. If you need me, tell me before. If you need me to work in the afternoon, give me a full-time contract. Then, I won't go painting walls anymore. I won't need to round up money anymore, and I would be here. But, instead, no, nothing. It's a really damn shit. (...) They even call me in the afternoon, because they know that I live close by (André/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm G).*

Regarding informality, employees complain about lacking limits, incoherence, the one-sidedness of flexibility requests, as well as lacking secure opportunities to do overtime. Most sharply, they criticise being constantly used to cover unforeseen needs, without receiving any understanding for their own personal flexibility or stability needs.

*Mario: Honestly, if you ask me to work overtime from time to time during the week, and then, in addition you ask me to come on Sunday, ok. But, if you don't let me do much overtime anymore, and ask me to come work on a Sunday only every two or three months, just because you need to fill in some hole in your schedules, then, really, I shit on these 50€ more per month. Sure, I could need also these 50€, but it's a question of principles. When you don't need me, nothing. But when it suits you, because somebody else is ill or whatever, then I have to come work on Sunday. Come on, kill yourself! (Mario/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm G)*

In comparison, the flexibility of formal work times appears as problematic only for a minority of two part-time employees in firm D and a former part-timer in G (Valentina/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm D; Laura/temporary part-time contract, salesclerk, firm D; Eric/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G). Company D is indeed the only case where official work times are entirely flexibilised without any formal re-regulation in the form of pre-established repeating shift patterns. In this case, employees consider the difficulties created by irregular work times most problematic for pursuing a second job. In addition, they criticise that flexibility is imposed unilaterally and illegally by their management.

The only other interviewees with strongly flexible formal work times are the third permanent part-time employee in D (Stefania), two part-time employees in C, one permanently employed sales clerk (Luca, C1), and one interim agency worker (Mimmo, C2). For different, partly

structural reasons, they all experience this flexibility as less problematic. Work times of the part-time sales clerk in C1 are explicitly used by management to cover up holes between the full-time shifts of his colleagues within the same department. This interviewee seems to have accepted and internalised this condition as part of his role within the work organisation and as the main reason of his employment. The agency worker has different shifts and numbers of work days for different periods of the year. But within each period, his work times are stable for several months. This reduces pressures and conflicts. The third part-time employee in D perceives work time flexibility as positive, as she experiences the informal individual negotiations with superiors as an effective way to exercise her own influence on work times. In contrast, she complains about a recently experienced reduction of such individual and informal margins for negotiation, caused by a change in her superiors' behaviour towards a more rigid, authoritarian allocation of still irregular work times.

All other interviewees define their work times as stable, as they follow officially fixed patterns with two to four different, but repeating regular weekly shifts. Each turn has (nearly) stable work times across the week, covering either morning, midday or afternoon/evening work. Variations of daily work times within each of these turns are generally only for a few hours. Mixed turns also exist with different but fixed hours for each weekday. This is also the case for firm I as well as for the remaining two interviewees in firm D - despite management's strong formal and informal temporal flexibility strategies present in these companies. Shift patterns of the two remaining interviewees from firm D are nearly regular simply due to their full-time status which leaves fewer possibilities for an irregular distribution of hours across the week rather than for part-timers. In firm I, the strong individualisation of work times simultaneously allows for a high overall degree of temporal flexibility and relatively stable individual work times: Every employee has his/her own specific but relatively stable official shift pattern. Apparently, such formalised limited flexibility is not perceived as problematic, despite repeated changes in the combination of shift patterns for each new planning period of ten to twelve weeks. Nor is shift work as such experienced as particularly problematic by employees. Both rather appear as an accepted 'normal' work reality.

Yet, besides the informal flexibility, fixed, official work times become problematic as well. The extension and/or bad allocation of formal work times is repeatedly criticised by

employees.<sup>185</sup> This especially concerns the inclusion of weekend, Sunday, and holiday work into regular time tables. Blackmailing pressures are felt particularly strongly for working on these specific days. The problems mentioned, however, do not cover only the experience of forced availability. In addition, they refer to not being paid on formal holidays.

Beyond the issue of flexibility, it is the burden of constant ‘bad’ formal work times that causes employees’ discontent. This regards having to work very early or late shifts, being assigned extremely short, long or split shifts, regularly having to do too many weekends, or lacking legally required days off per week.<sup>186</sup> Though these conflict experiences concern fixed work times, they are directly linked to flexibilisation processes, namely to the flexibilisation and extension of shop opening times.

*Luis: Having to get up at 4am to work from 5am to 10am every day, 6 days per week, that's really hard. Then your head starts turning. Because you don't have any life anymore. Always have to go to bed early. When you come back home at 10 in the morning and you don't have anything to do. You don't even manage to find a second job. And then you are afraid to let go of the job you already have. Well, you're really in a damn shit situation then. It's impossible to be more precarious than this (Luis/permanent part-time contract, stock operator, firm I).*

*Mario: Now, if you want to do any overtime, often you have to sacrifice your whole day. Mostly, I do work early in the morning. But then, they ask me to do overtime in the late afternoon. Like that, you finish regularly at 1 p.m. and then you have to come back at 4 p.m. Really, you have to sacrifice your whole day. Honestly, that's impossible, maybe one day you have a family; or even if you only want to spend some time with your partner. Once, it was much easier just to add one, two hours directly to your normal shifts. That was better, that way you could arrive at 20, 30 hours of overtime per month which made the difference. But now... (Mario/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

#### 7.1.4 In detail: Conflicts concerning functional flexibility, work tasks, and qualifications

Compared to issues raised about work time conflicts, a very similar pattern of discontent emerged from the interviews regarding functional flexibility, work tasks, and qualifications. From employees’ point of view, work tasks are controversial mostly because of the

---

<sup>185</sup> This also reflects the issues at stake in one of the most pronounced recent collective conflicts that emerged from the background interviews. The above mentioned strike in firm Cn was organised against a reorganisation of formal shift patterns which was unilaterally decided upon by management (see chapter 6.1.1).

<sup>186</sup> While a majority of part-time employees complain about short daily work times keeping them occupied the whole week, especially those with family duties suffer from the opposite situation of long quasi full-time shifts.

informality of flexibility arrangements, an extension of (informal) responsibilities, and/or because of rigidities in the formal work organisation.

Criticism of such rigidities and of lacking flexibility, mobility, and autonomy arises from experiences of being blocked in physically hard, repetitive or otherwise disliked 'bad' work tasks. Employees especially suffer from the monotonous, physically restrictive as well as highly regulated and easily controllable work at the cash desks. These characteristics strictly limit any margin of employee autonomy, be it with regard to the work process or break times and physical needs (such as toilet breaks). Additional stress results from uninterrupted customer contact and the constantly required emotional labour.<sup>187</sup>

*Eric: The cash desk is like being put in isolation.*

*André: Exactly, that's it, they put you in quarantine.*

*Eric: You know, just like when someone has a strange illness. Practically, it's a prison. They put you there because like that you are more under control. Because the department head is always present there with you, the chief cashier. It's not like when you do the refurnishing, and maybe you can get out for a moment and smoke a cigarette.*

*André: No, at the cash desks, you always have to ask for taking a break, to have somebody replacing you. And you will have to wait. Imagine you need to vomit, but you have to wait for half an hour or so before you can leave the cash desk, just to give an example.*

*Mario: Working at the cash desk is too much stupid work.*

*Eric: The problem isn't that you have to control for the money. It's precisely the contact with the customer, the way you talk with him. Because, the customer goes there to do the shopping. When he arrives at the cash desks, what does he do? He complains, because this and that is missing. And, you, you have to keep him good, you understand. Not to say: 'Hey, mister, what do you want from me?' (André/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk; Mario/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm G; +09/, all firm G)*

Further 'bad' work tasks mentioned are physically heavy stock operations and work in cold environments or with cold goods such as unloading trucks, handling frozen food or serving in a fresh fish counter. This kind of work is criticised, first of all, for its negative health effects. In addition, employees complain about insufficient, dysfunctional work place equipment, such as lacking space to count money at the cash desks, having old or broken cash registers, and lacking warm clothes for unloading trucks. Similarly, they criticise an inefficient

---

<sup>187</sup> Employees' accounts affirm shop stewards description of the work organisation at the cash desks as taking the form of a Fordist production line. For a vivid description of such negative experiences of cashiers' work and its interpretation as a sign for total control see Curcio 2002.

organisation of work processes that increases their work load and is more of a physical burden. This is the case particularly for stock operations, for example, regarding the way goods are packed - in too heavy packages or in inadequate numbers that do not represent customers' typical buying habits. In addition, complains about a suboptimal work organisation also concern the management of work times. This includes things like an inefficient delivery of stocks scheduled too late in the afternoon so that employees have to wait hours after their regular part-time work schedule in order to do overtime hours for the unloading. (The latter, at least in firm G, seems to be regularly organised on the basis of overtime hours only.)

Also concerning work load, work tasks become problematic due to latent understaffing resulting from management's strategies of numerical flexibilisation and cost reduction. Scarce workforce coverage of departments, together with the extended opening times, increases stress for individual employees and results in an intensification of the work load.

As can be seen from the earlier quotes, discontent about hard work tasks increases as these are confronted with the simultaneous experience of lacking professional growth and lacking functional flexibility. Employees' complaints about limited opportunities for growth in terms of qualification, pay levels, and positions within the workplace hierarchy can be equally interpreted as criticisms of a too rigid work organisation allowing for limited upward mobility. As indicated above, such lacking opportunities for skill development, from employees' eyes, are linked to the mechanism of forced availability and blackmailing. Looking more closely on work task conflicts in particular, it becomes clear that they equally result from processes of dequalification, lacking training offers, and limited margins for autonomy and responsibility within current formal work tasks.

*Cristian: Before the French company took over our firm, you felt more involved in the work process. Not really esteemed, but you had some autonomy. Now, with the French management, there is a total disinterest for human resources. The only thing they think about now is how to reduce costs. Once, every shop could decide which products to buy. Now, it's all centralised. Like that, they can pay less if they buy in big amounts. But it's not always true. (...) Once our department head did involve us in the choice of products (technical devices, cell phones). Now it's just like a production chain. Everything arrives already done. Now you don't sell a product because you think it's good, but because you are obliged to sell this and nothing else (Cristian/permanent full-time contract, salesclerk, firm C2).*

Dequalification, thus, is linked by employees to the standardisation and centralisation of work processes, which was described above as part of the current transformation processes in large



scale retailing and especially in terms of management's flexibility and cost reduction strategies. It is experienced as reducing employees' margins for autonomous decision making by delegating more qualified work tasks at higher levels of the hierarchy. At the same time, discontent about lacking margins of autonomy and participation in the work organisation also concerns the limited space and lacking recognition given by management to employees' informal, practical knowledge of production processes, and service interactions.

*Eric: Nowadays they put anybody to work at the fish counter without any experience with fish. I don't want to see the day somebody sells a rotten fish. That's not correct, you risk that somebody is falling ill. But here it's like that now: dequalification. They don't give contracts with any higher levels anymore (regarding wage and qualification). They say, they don't need them anymore. At the fresh food counters everything arrives now already prepared and packed, the cheese, but also the meat. You don't need anybody anymore who knows how to cut it (Eric/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

On the backdrop of lacking formal opportunities for skill development and autonomy, it is not surprising that informal ways of functional flexibility are welcomed widely among employees. As described above, informal flexibility takes the form of additional work tasks and responsibilities that are assigned to individual employees and which go beyond the qualification level and functions established in the employment contract. Yet, such informal functional flexibility is also controversial for the following reasons: Regarding formal work tasks and professional growth, informal flexibility is first of all criticised for being based on blackmailing, or it is set in relation to experiences of blackmailing on other aspects of work conditions and employment status. Second, a problem of informal functional flexibility is that it does not correspond with any formal recognition of qualifications, be it in terms of professional status or wage. As the following employee puts it:

*Alice: Well, I think it's a bit sad that I am still stuck here, always at the same qualification and wage level, the same as those who just started working here. I really don't like to be still put on the same level as the newcomers, after four years of experience in the job. (...) Yes, you know, they even call me at home if there are some problems with the operations at the cash desks, because I really know these things. And I also do all these extra tasks, like doing the work time schedules for the whole department. Normally, according to my contract, this wouldn't be my job. This is really frustrating, that I still remain on this fourth level as a cashier and hostess (Alice/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm D).*

In the absence of formal recognition, the margins of autonomy, qualification, and any higher position obtained in the workplace hierarchy on the basis of the daily informal work

organisation and actual competencies remain unstable and uncertain. And, they are not paid in form of an actual economic benefit.

Informal functional flexibility and the resulting multitasking also increases work load and stress. This creates uncertainty about limits of work duties and effective responsibilities especially in the case of mistakes. Conflicts arise when the transfer of effective resources to enact such responsibility and master the respective work load remain insufficient. In addition, a high number of different, constantly changing informal work tasks hinder possibilities for specialisation.

In sum, conflict experiences regarding both work times and work tasks do not mainly result from flexibilisation as such. Instead, they are caused by the specific mode in which flexibility is regulated: By the precarising blackmailing mechanism of informal individualised flexibility regulations. As was previously suggested, this especially concerns the informality of flexibility arrangements and their location within the context of an authoritarian work organisation. The latter leaves very little margin for any autonomous organisation of concrete work processes or any effective influence on work times by employees themselves.

Moreover, in the context of the current restructuring of labour processes, conflict experiences relate to an extension and intensification of the required labour performances rather than being only linked to their flexibilisation - be this in terms of extended and bad work times or additional and hard work tasks. These processes of extension, intensification, and temporal flexibilisation result from management's competitive strategies of cost reduction and prolonged shop opening times.

Through the mechanism of forced availability, flexibilisation reveals itself in employees' accounts as a central means of extending and intensifying labour requirements.<sup>188</sup> The informal individualised modus of these flexibility regulations produces a transfer of responsibility for flexibility achievements, work results, and work conditions on individual employees. Management's arbitrary decision power over whom to confront with flexibility requests and whom to confine to disliked work tasks represents more than a simple disciplinary mechanism of direct control. In addition, it serves as a tool to foster employees' self-responsible readiness to accept intensified work tasks and extended work hours. The

---

<sup>188</sup> Dörre points to the effect and function of flexible forms of employment and other external means of flexibilisation as enhancing absolute surplus production, achieved by an extension of work times, a reduction of wages or a degradation of work conditions (2009: 43). The intensification of labour requirements found here, induced by the internal flexibilisation of labour processes and the subjectification of labour control, can be interpreted as an increased relative surplus production. The importance of these intensification processes recalls Ezzy's analysis where he interprets them as an underlying logic and effect of normative control strategies (2001).

empirical findings presented here have sustained this argument. As interviewees' accounts have shown, management's arbitrary decision power within a system of informal individualised labour relations produces a state of permanent insecurity. It enhances employees' vulnerability not only with regard to the employment relation, but also in terms of daily work conditions.

In order to understand their effects on workplace conflicts, flexibilisation processes have to be placed within the overall context of management's strategies of labour exploitation and control. As such, the analysis now turns to examine different forms of labour control present in employees' work experiences. It explicitly addresses the linkages between processes of flexibilisation, precarisation, and subjectification. Investigating the conflict experiences on this level is accomplished in four steps, where different direct and indirect forms of labour control are differentiated. Three sections address the fields of hierarchical supervision, participatory and normative management strategies, as well as individualised labour relations. In a fourth section, special attention is paid to controls over service interactions and conflicts regarding the specific emotional character of frontline retail labour, as well as the interlinked character of direct and indirect control strategies.

## *7.2 Employee experiences of labour control and subjectification*

### **7.2.1 Direct control: Conflictive hierarchical supervision, internalisation, and claims for autonomy**

In contrast to shop stewards' accounts, direct control and supervision appear as only limited conflict issues in the employee interviews - be this in their open or hidden forms. On first glance, this seems to be in contrast to employees' negative experiences of blackmailing within an authoritarian workplace regime. Yet, it might reflect and underline the fact that the mechanism of forced availability is not simply based on forced subordination and external control, but also relies on indirect pressures as well as subjectifying and normative means of labour control. It is these forms of indirect control, rather than direct supervision, which are viewed as the most conflictive with regard to flexibility regulations as seen from employees' eyes.

Employees complain about stress caused by the supervision of work speed and work results only to a limited extent. Even the tight, computer based supervision of the number and speed of customer contacts for each individual sales clerk in place in firm I is met with only little

criticism. A little more problematic, at least for individual sales clerks in firms C and I, appears to be control over work results in terms of sales numbers. For cashiers, conflicts also do not result from work speed as such, but from management's control over cash accounts and occasionally missing amounts of money. The degree of related problem pressures is linked by employees themselves to stress and speed requirements, as these increase the risks for mistakes. Yet, it is the ex-post disciplinary measures rather than any direct supervision or the work speed requirements that provokes criticism.

In spite of their discontent with an intensified work load, employees appear to have largely internalised requirements and responsibilities for work speed and results. What turns out as a conflict, on this backdrop, are only the conditions and effective possibilities to enact the required self-control. In fact, widespread practices of internalisation and rule compliance, not only with regard to direct control, are traced as a central adaptive coping practice in chapter eight.

What is already viewed as more problematic is the authoritarian assignment and supervision of break times. This concerns limited possibilities for taking breaks in general (or especially cashiers' toilet breaks), as well as lacking opportunities for autonomous management in this matter.

*Valentina: Recently, the director has decided that he doesn't want to see anybody taking a break after 5 p.m. anymore. (...) Not real breaks, real breaks do not exist anyway, only 5 minutes to smoke a cigarette or to go to the toilet. (...) When the director isn't in, work is fine. It's not that we wouldn't work then, but there is a different atmosphere. Not that authoritarian atmosphere. The director usually goes around controlling. Everybody is afraid. (...) Really, how do you do this, to tell your employees not to take any break after 5 p.m.? If I start working at 2.30 p.m., why shouldn't I be allowed to go for a break at 5.30 p.m.? If I'm there until 8.30 p.m.? Really, I don't think that's normal. It's absurd. Anyway, also in the morning we manage our breaks by ourselves, and in a very responsible way. I really don't see the problem. (...) What I really hate about it is that certain things simply get imposed, without reason. The problem is that everybody is afraid. So, nobody goes for a break anymore in the afternoon (Valentina/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm D).*

As for the discontent raised above by Stefania, Valentina complains about the introduction of more rigid time planning in firm D, because it entails a loss of previously gained margins for independent decision making. It is this loss of acquired autonomy which is experienced as problematic and takes the role of a 'conflict catalyser'. In other words, conflicts regarding

break times touch upon the central problem of labour control: The confrontation between hierarchical supervision and direction, and employees' claims for autonomy within the work process. Beyond the question of the amount and timing of breaks, the interviewee here clearly expresses a desire for autonomous decision making and flexibility, as well as a strong dislike of authoritarian work atmospheres. To express it optimistically, a general desire emerges from the interviews for having a more 'democratic workplace regime' (Ferrerias 2007). This aspiration is not just related to the management of break times:

*Elena: Yes, I always address my superiors in an informal way (using the informal 'tu' and the first name instead of the formal 'lei' and the family name). In my opinion there should be, if not a relation between equals, because obviously that's not possible, there should be, how could I say, a relation that is as little hierarchical as possible. That's why I always call superiors by their first name without any problems (Elena /permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C2).*

This issue of autonomy and democracy is relevant also for a third conflict issue concerning disciplinary measures. The interviews conducted for this study suggest that, among the kind of orders at a supervisor's discretion, the disciplinary device of transferring someone from one department to another is considered particularly problematic. Beyond complains about unappealing work tasks, conflict experiences here again focus on the forced nature of transfers and the experienced arbitrariness of such management decision making, which was already evident with the forced availability requirements.

In the search for conflict fields, this contradiction between direct control and orders from supervisors, and employees' aspirations for autonomy and a non-authoritarian workplace regime, points to the role of indirect control and participatory, normative management strategies. Before the analysis turns to this field, however, conflicts regarding the service interactions and management's combined direct and indirect control strategies are considered in more detail.

### 7.2.2 Control over customer service and the limits of emotional labour

In contrast to the issue of direct control, service interactions with customers are highly conflictive according to the interviews. The only interviewees disagreeing with this perspective in this sample were the stock operators who do not directly interact with customers, as well as two young, recently hired employees in firm I who do not see customer

relations as very problematic. For all other employees interviewed, a central challenge of retail work stems from this frontline service character and the direct customer contact it entails. As Hochschild's (1983: 16) study on flight attendants concluded, and as underscored by this study's interviewees, frontline service work demands hard emotional labour.

Related conflicts are expressed as tensions between the management control and requested friendly, profitable customer relations on the one hand, and the factual conditions of emotional labour on the other. Resulting from management's strategies to enhance service quality and customer satisfaction, employees in the studied firms are expected to enact friendly and standardised customer contacts. This is the case especially for employees at the cash desks. As seen above, requirements include an obligatory smile, standardised phrases to address customers as well as dress codes. Above all, employees highlight as problematic the strict prohibition against arguing with customers.

They underline the unreasonable character of such emotional requests and point to the necessary limits of their emotional labour capacities. All the more, as they are emotionally involved and challenged in the work process, employees experience it as difficult, if not impossible, to establish clear boundaries between work and life, between 'labour-related' and 'personal' concerns and emotions, as well as between the requested performance of emotional labour and their actual feelings.

*Elena: Yes, in fact, they made us do these training courses, saying that you always have to be there with a smile on your face, thank you, good bye. Besides, you do say this spontaneously, because in the instance that somebody arrives at your desk, you just say good morning, and when he leaves, thanks, good bye, it's just logical. However, lots of times, I speak for myself, eh, the smile on the face, I don't have it, because I'm so tired that spontaneously I just don't feel like smiling. (...) No, I also couldn't smile nevertheless, against my mood. No, because this would be a forced smile. It's not my character to force a smile. I don't manage to do something I don't feel like doing. (...) And then, you always try to divide, the problem you have at home and your work. The problem is that it's not easy to do so. Often your mind turns back to the problems at home. But you always try to let nobody notice it  
(Elena /permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C2).*

As illustrated by this quote, employees frequently complain about having to smile when they are in a bad mood or preoccupied, and to also be friendly when they are confronted with aggressions or perceived injustices. Aside from the indivisibility of their personalities and emotions, employees insist in the bad behaviour of (certain) customers as a second limit for emotional labour capacities.

*Daniele: But, it's difficult if someone offends you. Just comes in the morning and offends you, just like that. There are people like this. Once, in the morning, a guy looked at me, and I looked back, a strange look. And then he said: 'Why are you staring at me?' Well, he looked first. 'He says: 'Fuck off!' Somebody who offends you like this... . What could you answer? If this would not be my workplace, I would have liked to give him a really bad slap. But you can't do this, it's your work.*

*Eric: People take advantage of this fact that this is our workplace and that we can't answer. On the street they would never dare to say such things.(...) Here we have to be polite, but most customers do not merit such politeness. And then it happens that we just explode sometimes*

*(Daniele/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm G; Eric/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

Despite their attempts to demonstrate a 'correct' service attitude, customers' behaviour is experienced by employees as clearly beyond their control. This experience turns management's attempts to attribute responsibility for customer satisfaction to employees into another unrealisable request. Most interviewees strongly object to management's logic of the customer as 'king' who is always right. This logic is experienced by employees as substituting an honest and respectful service interaction (understood by themselves as a pre-condition for 'good' service) with subservience and servility.

Finally, emotional labour capacities appear to be limited in employees' eyes due to the surrounding work conditions. As also shop stewards pointed out, employees believe that management-driven customer relation practices and especially their standardisation and strict control are opposed to the goal of providing good service.<sup>189</sup> More precisely, these management concepts contradict employees own definitions of and interests in delivering 'good service', as they limit the space and time for personal interactions and care. The same holds true for other aspects of the overall work organisation, such as the intensification of work processes, work speed requirements, and stress caused by understaffing. Employees, first off all, criticise the dominance of economic efficiency goals over service quality. Their reactions reflect the inherent contradictions between management's strategies of cost reduction and holding a customer orientation.

---

<sup>189</sup> The complains regarding emotional labour capacities and conditions expressed here by employees are similar to shop stewards' evaluation of management's control strategies. In the background interviews, shop stewards saw these strategies as an attempt to transform employees into profitable objects representing the firm image. Beyond the experienced counter-productivity of control measures, employees' criticisms recall shop stewards' above mentioned statements about lacking resources to effectively take over assigned responsibilities in a context of highly stressful work conditions, be it for correct invoices, sales figures or customer satisfaction.

The insufficient space and value given to employees' knowledge of the service and production processes also violates their aspirations for providing 'good service'. This particularly concerns their capacities for dealing with difficult customers and solving conflicts, as well as their (lack of) influence regarding how to construct service environments (for example, having the opportunity to give input on product presentations and sales campaigns). That is, in contrast to management's interest in selling as much as possible, in employees' eyes, the issue of service quality touches upon the whole work process. In fact, management's unilateral decisions are experienced as being incompetent, lacking 'real' shop floor knowledge, and inefficiently limiting employees' autonomous and better informed realisation of work and service requirements. In a similar manner, a dress code in one of the shops is criticised for being too strict, not reflecting (dirtying) work realities, and limiting employees' own sense of a 'correct' service attitude and appearance.

Summing up, management's control over customer relations in its mixed form of direct and indirect control and as aiming at the core tasks of retail labour, appears to be much more conflictive than direct control and supervision of work processes and performances in general. However, arising conflicts have similar contents, combining claims for autonomy (in the performance of service interactions) with a self-interested internalisation of responsibility for work results (in this case for service quality). In this field of customer relations, employees express a stronger preoccupation not only for the limits of tolerable forms of control, but also for the boundaries of acceptable and achievable work requirements.

Due to this conflict, customer relations and service orientation effectively result as one possible breakpoint in management's control strategies. Yet, unlike Korczynski's and (to a lesser extent) Voss-Dahn's thesis, this emotional labour conflict does not imply a necessary limit for management's strategies of flexibilisation and precarisation or a benefit for employee power over the work process (Korczynski 2000, 2003; Voss-Dahn 2000; see chapter 3.3 and 3.4). Instead, the analysis of management strategies and flexibility regulations above (chapter six) showed that a management's service orientation is a driving force towards increased flexibilisation. It has been demonstrated how forms of direct and indirect control combine in management's attempts to control the service interaction, and how precarisation functions as a means of workforce alignment to flexibilisation and forced availability. As such, the service conflicts reflect the precarious, stressful, and alienating effects of subjectifying, Neo-Taylorist control over service performances, combined as they are with normative control, responsabilisation, forced availability, and permanent threats of rationalisation. The analysis



of employees' coping practices later highlights the interlinked character of any such alienation and submission on the one hand and resistance and potential employee power on the other, by pointing to employees' practices of appropriation of service values and knowledge.

The next section asks how the conflict between top-down hierarchies and aspirations in autonomy and self-determination translates into employee accounts of management's indirect, participatory control strategies. In this, the connection between conflictive experiences of participation, blackmailing, and forced availability are central.

### 7.2.3 Indirect control and the criticism of participatory management strategies as fake

Three forms of indirect labour control were differentiated above, which are present in the cases under study. These focus on: a) economic decentralisation and a transfer of responsibility for economic results down to employees, b) normative measures to enhance firm culture and corporate identity, and c) the individualisation of labour relations including individual 'voice' policies. In employees' everyday experiences, these different strategies appear as closely linked, as achievements or burdens resulting from one of the three fields are compared and set in relation to the others. One common central conflict issue exists in all four companies: The promises of participation, on which all these three forms of indirect labour control are based, are predominantly experienced by employees as fake.<sup>190</sup>

*Valentina: There is a lot of hypocrisy in all this stuff of participation, that's evident. It's normal, all these meetings, assemblies, the dinners and trips, they are all there for a management purpose (Valentina/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm D).*

Real opportunities of participation lack behind both management's rhetoric and employees' own aspirations. Additionally, management requests for normative integration are contrasted by everyday work conditions and especially by employees' experiences of blackmailing, vulnerability, and precarisation.<sup>191</sup> Employees' negative experiences of an authoritarian, only

---

<sup>190</sup> Again, shop stewards' accounts of control devices appear as reflecting employees' everyday work experiences, as they stated a very similar conflict, although their above mentioned evaluation of participatory management strategies as too limited entails less fundamental mistrust and frustration than employees' experience of 'fake'.

<sup>191</sup> Such a limiting effect of precarisation experiences on the functioning of normative control strategies has been underlined also by Arthus in her study on precarious service labour in the transport and catering sectors: "These effective integrative effects [of normative control and participatory offers], however, find a limit in the precarious material work conditions which systematically also entail humiliating components" (Arthus 2008: 37. Translation K.C.). The main contentious issues and expressions of precarisation traced by Arthus are low wages

seemingly participatory regime of flexibility regulations, and their above traced claims for self-determination also end up rendering a management's indirect labour control strategies conflictive – causing more discontent than with the means of direct supervision.

Limited actual opportunities for participation are criticised above all with regard to management strategies of decentralisation and responsabilisation. Employees express displeasure about scarce, irregular shop assemblies, limited information about their firm's development, and lacking space for criticising management decisions and work processes. Where employees are asked to give their opinion on how to improve work processes and economic results, they experience a lack of attention given to their ideas. Critical feedback or requests for an amelioration of work conditions rarely seem to be taken into consideration by management.

What is more, employees link such lacking opportunities of participation within the work organisation with a criticism of equally lacking opportunities for professional growth, training as well as responsibility and autonomy in the labour process. In other words, responsibility and qualification are closely interrelated in employees' eyes.

*Mario: No, recently I really don't care for anything. I don't feel responsible for anything. I do things only because I have to. Because, well because, you don't feel, don't know how to say, you do not get attracted, they do not even try to attract you. You don't see any prospects, any possibility to do something useful, to feel just a bit important. Then it gets to be a degrading, humiliating work, that you do only because of the wage. And you hope to find something else. (...) Yes, sure, that would be great. If they would make you feel really participating, also outside the firm, trying to create a group. (...) But, here the policy in reality is just this: 'We give you your wage, and you have to do what we say.' (...) Things changed when the ownership changed to the French company. Before, it was more like a family atmosphere, also more participation. You still saw the possibility to maybe one day become a department head yourself, if only you worked well. Now there is nothing like that, no prospects at all<sup>192</sup> (Mario/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

As with service interactions, employees express frustration about limited objective possibilities for achieving performance goals. This is the case, for example, for economic

---

and a continuous threat of being easily substitutable, confronted with stressful high performance requirements, as well as involuntary part-time labour with highly unstable work times.

<sup>192</sup> It is interesting that a lacking firm culture is linked in this quote to the French property while in the academic discourse, French companies are seen as vanguards when it comes to participatory management strategies. Apparently, the former familiaristic Italian model gave employees a better impression of being part of a 'family business' than the corporate culture strategies of the French multinational.

incentives linked to sales rates. In a context of external restrictions, such as limited customer purchasing power, such wage bonuses seem unreachable, empty promises. In a similar vein, the above described contradictions between employees' own knowledge of the production process and their understandings of 'good' service, on the one hand, and management's imperative of economic efficiency and standardisation of service interactions, on the other, are voiced not only as an objective limit for service performances, but also as a sign of fake participatory management strategies.

With regard to corporate culture, management's lack of a real commitment is, again, deduced from the limited number, the irregularity, and the lacking seriousness of respective initiatives such as company dinners, etc. This is the case especially for the temporary employee in firm D, who is excluded from any firm assemblies, awards, or cultural events. Such an exclusion of temporary employees contributes to the experience of 'fake' as it contradicts the slogan of a family spirit and renders the integration of temporary employees into the firm even more difficult.

Aside from the infrequency and lack of seriousness of such cultural activities, the experience of falseness results from a contradiction between management's readiness to spend money on such activities and employees' daily experiences of cost reduction imperatives. Particularly, this concerns lacking increases in part-time hours and wages, which would otherwise represent an economic form of participation.

Finally, also management's strategies of individual voice are criticised for their limited real scope and effect. This concerns the possibility for resolving problems by individually talking to superiors. Especially strong frustration is expressed by the following employee, when summarising his attempts to gain an official recognition of the qualified work tasks he has been carrying out:

*Eric: Well, it happened to me that when I did these work tasks which were not written in my contract, which didn't correspond to my pay level, I asked lots of time: Hey, but don't you think that I should have the third level to do these things? But, each time I went to talk with the superiors, with the director, the only reaction was that they slapped the door in front of my nose, even with very hard words. That's what talking face to face with the managers is like (Eric/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

A further example is this quote referring to individual performance evaluation meetings:

*Marco: Every month we also do these personal interviews with our direct superior. They ask you like that, positive and negative points about the work, your progress, your opinion about your superiors (...) and we also have to study all the notions linked to our work, they even interrogate us. (...) They want to know everything, personal relations, want to make everything run well. (...) These personal interviews are useful to solve some problems, because they are the only mechanism we have: to solve interpersonal problems, or things like 'I don't like to do this and that specific work because my arm hurts, for these things it works. (...) Every week there is a meeting of a quarter of an hour with the department head about how the firm goes. Every month a face to face interview with your department head, every six months we do another evaluation for this longer period. And, sometimes also someone from the human resource department comes. We are constantly put under control, I don't know, but I really feel oppressed.*

*Alice: They ask you things, they don't control you. (...) Anyway, in the shop it's different. (...) I only did these personal interviews three times in three years that I'm here. That's a negative point for my superior. (...) I see these meetings as a time dedicated to me, a good thing. In fact, I often protested, complained to the director that they were not done (Marco/permanent full-time contract, stock operator, firm D, Alice/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm D).*

Interestingly, the stock operator in this example is very critical towards such performance evaluation meetings as a means of control and conflict resolution. However, this criticism remains ambiguous as these individual interviews are also experienced as effective mechanisms for problem solving, regarding individual problems with the daily work process or social relations at the work place.<sup>193</sup> His colleague, instead, does not perceive any control effect, but in line with the conflict pattern described so far, complains about the reduced number of such meetings in the shop.

A special case in terms of individual voice issues concerns the promoter in this sample. He is additionally confronted with lacking voice opportunities resulting from his position in between (a) an external interim agency, which acts as his employer, (b) an equally external company whose products he promotes and who represents the actual user of his labour power, and (c) the supermarket as a contractor of this external company and as his physical work place. This positioning makes it impossible for him to trace any responsible counterpart with

---

<sup>193</sup> At least in part, this difference might be explained by the different treatment of warehouse workers in the centralised stock and cashiers and sales clerks in the outlet points of the same firm with regard to internal voice and the frequency of such performance evaluations. There is much more attention paid to the stock operators 'well-being' and their integration, as they have a much more critical position within the whole work process and are the only unionised section in that firm. A strike in the central stocks – as there are only two for all outlets of that firm in Italy – could easily block the whole business.

whom to discuss problems. No formally responsible superiors are present at the work place and each individual actor can delegate responsibilities to others.<sup>194</sup>

In addition to their limited scope, the analysis above indicated the sharp contrast between management's participatory strategies and employees' everyday experiences of blackmailing, forced availability, precarisation, and vulnerability as reasons for their widespread perception as false and empty promises. As the last quotes showed, employees experience their individual action potential and possibilities for effective participation as severely limited, due to the context of informal individualised flexibility regulations. It is rare for them to realise and defend their own interests by means of direct, informal negotiations with superiors.

The arbitrariness, the personal preference based character, and/or the disciplinary intent of superiors' decisions, along with their authoritarian decision making power, are experienced by employees as strongly limiting their actual opportunities of participation and control over their work conditions. In this, it is not the logic of merit as such that is experienced as problematic in terms of participation, but rather the lacking and insecure pay-off of individual availability demonstrations and efforts undertaken to acquire merit.

Effective participation is moreover limited by the precarious and unstable character of any results obtained in individual, informal (flexibility) negotiations. Without formal recognition, such results can not only be revoked at any time; but, due to their individual character, they are highly dependent on a specific supervisor and the personal relations established with him/her. Once this supervisor changes, which is a frequent event and part of management's strategies in the firms at hand, all concessions obtained (and any so far established margins of autonomy) are immediately obsolete.

#### 7.2.4 Indirect labour control, individualisation, and lacking collective resources

Given these experiences of limited action potential in individualised labour relations, it is hardly surprising that, besides fake offers of participation, employees particularly criticise the individualising effects of all forms of indirect control. This concerns not only the informal individualised modus of flexibility regulations itself, but also those participatory management strategies that aim to increase competition on the shop floor, such as through the introduction

---

<sup>194</sup> For a detailed consideration of employees' experiences of interim labour and especially of this lack of responsibility and the related distortion of direction rights see Fullin 2004.

of public performance rankings and awards.<sup>195</sup> While only a minority of interviewees does not consider management induced competition problematic or relevant, the majority is concerned about an atmosphere of mistrust, cheating, lacking communication, and solidarity among colleagues, expressing unease about the strong social control exercised on each other in terms of everybody's adherence to pro-firm attitudes and adhering to maximum availability demonstrations.

*Mario: It's all a big mess, everybody speaks bad about the others, you see, to try to obtain something, also to demonstrate availability, yes. (...) Well, there are people who are close to pension, maybe some still participate in the strikes... it should be them the first to be ready to help us young ones in our struggles, because they don't have anything to lose anymore. But, instead, it's these nearly retired people that maybe, when we do a strike, they go and cover your working hours, they do overtime hours (Mario/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

*Eric: But, just in these days, I see even more the contrast between the older and the younger employees. (...) The older colleagues by now say that they would have already done their struggles and that would have obtained what they'd asked for. But, if I would have 40 years and some children, I would think also of my children and their future. My child, tomorrow with a part-time job, how will he or she manage to live? The struggle has to be for all, there mustn't be any distinctions, such as: no, no, better not to fight for this boy to get his 38 hours, because then I won't get that much overtime anymore (Eric/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

As seen from these last quotes, a strong clash is perceived between old and young colleagues and between more and less vulnerable employees: On the one hand, there are the younger employees in a position perceived as highly precarious in the beginning of their work life, still having to obtain stabilisation, professional growth, and a protected status. On the other, there are the older employees with rather secure positions and access to old protections obtained in former periods of class struggle, being at the end of their careers and not having much more to reach, but rather, a previously acquired status to defend. Yet, mistrust is also generalised beyond this distinction line as it is directly caused by the mechanism of forced availability, individual merit, and competition, which pushes employees to individually demonstrate not only a maximum of personal availability, but to appear more available than others.

---

<sup>195</sup> Such experiences and criticism of the individualising, competition enhancing effects of management's logic of merit, in employees' accounts, might go hand in hand with a positive approval of merit evaluations as such and with individual availability strategies to acquire such merits. As is later shown, when analysing in more detail employees coping practices, employees balance this latent contradiction by differentiating between merit and unfair competition and by attributing the responsibility for competition and mistrust to colleagues' behaviour and not to management's strategies.

This widespread mistrust and cheating among employees reflects the effectiveness of management's strategies of fragmentation. As described above, such fragmentation is produced by a differentiated treatment of different fractions of the workforce. It becomes clear now from employees' accounts that this particularly concerns differentiated offers of participation made to specific groups and individuals within a context of individualised labour relations. Beyond the division lines between young and old, recent and established, or temporary and permanent employees with a more or less precarious formal status, differentiations are created between more and less available and cooperative individuals or between more and less productive departments. The most evident example for such a differentiated, discriminating treatment are the following experiences of an employee with a migration background working in firm I:

*Luis: Personally, I do speak as a non-European migrant. Ok, this firm provides some opportunities, but somebody like me, a migrant, doesn't have any chance in here. This firm has 70% part-time employment, everybody has to give a maximum to obtain any hour increases, it's even more complicated for me. (...) They say, this firm would value diversity. But I don't see that, it's just not true. The only department where they do employ migrants is the merchandising, where you do the hard job of loading and unloading the trucks. It's not that it is racism, but I don't know. (...) It's been only me, two other migrants and one young Italian guy who had to do the early morning shifts, from 4 or 5 a.m., 6 days a week (Luis/permanent part-time contract, stock operator, firm I).*

Employees' uneasiness about the resulting negative, not only competitive but insidious atmosphere among colleagues also indicates potential limits of such management strategies. These result from contradictions inherent in management's simultaneous attempt to integrate and exploit employees' social capital and their normative aspirations in social interactions, and, at the same time, to condition and restrict these aspirations where they do not match control and work requirements. The resulting conflicts experienced by employees range from dissatisfaction with an overall work atmosphere marked by jealousy and cheating to criticism of colleagues' lacking solidarity when it comes to dealing with 'personal' problems and also colleagues' limited interest in participating in collective agency issues, especially strikes and during a temporary employment phase.

This latter point indicates that employees are not simply worried about limited individual action potential, but also perceive these as linked to lacking collective resources and capacities. Such concerns are expressed not only with regard to shop floor solidarity, but also

touch upon the institutions of collective interest representation, the availability of collective support, and collective norms. First of all, experiences of lacking collective resources are due to anti-union pressures exercised by management as part of blackmailing practices. These pressures are especially directed towards temporary and highly vulnerable employees who are excluded from any formal collective institutions such as shop floor assemblies. Secondly, the corrosion of collective protections and norms resulting from individual informal flexibility regulations is criticised for its precarising, destabilising effects. Finally, the loss of unions' power positions in collective bargaining is viewed by a majority of employees as highly problematic.

*André: You always have to demonstrate availability, especially when your contract is close to finishing. This also means that you couldn't join the union assemblies as long as you only had a temporary contract. (...) They told you, and they didn't tell you: They made you understand. Because, there have been previous cases. Somebody who went to the assemblies and then, casually, didn't get his contract confirmed. That's just how things are; you have to be good guys (André/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm G).*

*Valentina: That's the problem about management's strategy: They don't put down anything in writing. This way, nobody knows about his or her rights. (...) there's a lot of authority there. What the superiors say, that's the rule. Besides, people don't know the laws. And also our direct superiors don't, or at least they pretend not to know (Valentina/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm D).*

*Giuseppe: During these last years the unions have lost a lot of power, at the national level, but also within this firm. Especially when they discussed the new collective contract, I could see that. They try to come to an agreement, a compromise, but then they come to agree always on a lower level. Let's say the strong part is played by me. Now, I always win the compromise. Yes, the unions really lost a lot of power. This is not only a general phenomena, it's for a precise reason. In my opinion, it's because of precariousness. At the end, there is a kind of unsupportable subjection growing (Giuseppe/permanent part-time contract, stock operator, firm I).*

Obviously, employees' attitudes towards collective interest representation and agency are more diverse than this short overview indicated. They are dealt with in more detail in chapter nine when discussing the role of collective coping practices. Some differentiations are also made in a following section of this chapter (7.4) when analysing different conflict experiences among the different cases and employee groups. For now, it is sufficient to highlight the simultaneous experience of limited individual and collective action potential that characterises



employees' accounts of individualised labour relations, in general, and of individualised flexibility regulations, in particular.

Summing up employees' reactions to indirect, responsabilising, normative, and individualising forms of control, these both confirm already mentioned aspects of precarisation and reveal others. These include the uncertain success of individual availability demonstrations, the instability of individually negotiated flexibility arrangements, as well as the lacking individual power positions in such negotiations resulting from a loss and lack of collective support and protections. Beyond the above analysed precarising effects of informal flexibility arrangements, this affirms the decisive role played by the individualisation of labour relations for both the functioning of blackmailing-based flexibility regulations and employees' experiences of precarisation.

Among the different elements of indirect labour control, individualised labour relations and forms of individual voice are experienced as a most virulent conflict field. As they are directly linked to the modus of daily flexibility negotiations, limited action potential is perceived and criticised most strongly here. The diverse forms of economic decentralisation and firm culture initiatives appear as less central for employees' daily negotiations and struggles about the terms and conditions of flexible labour exploitation. Besides being criticised as fake, they are more often met with simple disinterest rather than with strong complaints.

Yet, individualisation does not only add to employees' experiences of precarisation. The latter also influence employees' attitudes towards all sorts of management strategies of indirect control and participatory offers, as these are confronted with true work conditions and consequently criticised as fake. As in the case of management's control over service interactions, conflicts concern both the issue of supportable forms of control and hierarchical direction, and the issue of limits and conditions of labour requirements. The former conflict is raised by employees' claims for both participation and autonomy within the work organisation, whereas the latter is controversial in terms of binding rules and securing outcomes of individual flexibility negotiations.

### *7.3 Generalisations: Common patterns in employees' conflict experiences*

Two main conflict fields have emerged from the interview analysis so far: flexibilisation and precarisation, namely in terms of unlimited labour requirements; and fake participation offers and lacking real autonomy. These outcomes reflect the state of the art in subject-oriented research, and confirm the relevance of participation as a conflictive issue also in the case of repetitive, strictly controlled types of frontline service labour. In addition, these two fields of conflict here appear as closely interrelated, both on the level of flexibility regulations and employees' everyday experiences. If they are summarised below in two distinct sections, this separation is undertaken only to facilitate a clearer presentation, and not to stipulate any opposition between both conflict fields and/or between supposedly related instrumental (quantitative, workforce, and subsistence related) and expressive (qualitative, subjectivity, and work content related) employee interests.

Reflecting the always already subjectivity bound character of labour practices, these generally distinguished interest levels appear as closely interrelated from the interviews in this study. On the one hand, the quantitative, material conditions of labour exploitation and efforts decisively influence the way in which employees might develop their subject-related interest within the work process. The issue of pay directly conditions employees' living conditions and, thus, their opportunities for self-development outside the work place. On the other, form and extent of labour requirements always also depends on the organisation of labour processes, and thus, equally on the scope for employee participation and one's own control.<sup>196</sup> In this sense, employees' criticism of routine work tasks, lacking opportunities for professional growth, qualification, and autonomy within the work process, might express both a demand for participation and related self-development, and a conflict about the conditions of satisfactory or the limits of dissatisfactory alienating and/or precarising labour requirements.

---

<sup>196</sup> Ferreras convincingly argues that instrumental interest should be considered as part of employees' encompassing expressive interests. In Ferreras' case, the main field of conflict for supermarket cashiers regards workplace hierarchies and control regimes. Mentioned contradictions evolve around employees' everyday experiences of an authoritarian work organisation which are a strong mismatch with their aspirations for a democratic work context. The existing work organisation is experienced as based on arbitrary decision powers of superiors combined with a system of exchange of favours. What is of special interest here is that such expectations in participation develop in still very hierarchically structured work places. This leads to the conclusion to consider them as universal intrinsic interests not limited to specific contexts of high qualification and/or especially permissive and participatory management strategies (Ferreras 2007).

The following section further explores these linkages, while summarising the outcomes established so far for each of the two conflict fields. The generalisation of experiences of precarisation across all employee groups is stressed, as well as the presence of self-regulation requirements and conflicts over participation in a Neo-Taylorist context of repressive integration. Section 7.3.1 points to the processual character and the relevance of subjective perceptions of precarisation. Section 7.3.2 highlights the ambiguous, contradictory, and brittle state of both labour control and employees' action potential, which might be achieved through the mechanisms of participation.

### 7.3.1 Generalised gradual processes of precarisation

From employees' perspectives, work and employment conditions appear as precarious with regard to a wide range of aspects, touching upon the employment status as well as the labour process. Experiences of precarisation result from (a) low (part-time) wages and unstable, insecure, and insufficient means for making a living wage, (b) the uncertainty of temporary employment contracts, (c) lacking professional growth perspectives both in terms of income and skill development, (d) unstable work times and hours, (e) uncertain informal work tasks, responsibilities, and lacking respective resources, and (f) limited access to collective rights and the corrosion of formal binding norms. In the light of these empirical findings, the broad understanding of precarisation dynamics proposed as a result of the critical literature review, appears to widely reflect employees' everyday experiences.<sup>197</sup>

Even such an extended definition still displays only one side, or rather a first step of precarisation processes. As this analysis underlines, precarisation comes not only from multiple forms of instability, uncertainty, and insecurity of current and future work and employment conditions. Moreover, it results from the informal individualised modus by which the retail work process, in general, and flexibilisation, in particular, are regulated – and

---

<sup>197</sup> The above definition linked precarisation to one or several of the following structural features: the casual and flexible character of employment contracts and/or work times, the instability or insufficiency of incomes (to make a living), the destabilisation of qualifications, work identities and social recognition, the insecurity of alternative labour market opportunities due a context of mass unemployment, the reduced or nonexistent coverage by legal protections and social security schemes, and the reduced access to collective interest representation. The only issues not raised in my interviews are a reduced coverage by social security and the question of social recognition in terms of social appreciation and hierarchisation of different jobs. This is due to the fact that all but one employee in my sample are regular dependent 'subordinate' employees with contracts including social contributions and access to social protection schemes. Social ranking and valuation do not emerge as a topic in the interviews as these concentrated on work-place related conflict experiences and coping practices. Employees' social relations outside the workplace are considered only in a very limited way in terms of living conditions and reproductive duties as context factors of precarisation. Yet, social recognition effectively proved a central matter at the level of the work process itself, regarding recognition of labour performances, qualifications and given availability.

thus from the forms of labour control in place. The resulting mechanism of forced availability builds on the destabilisation or precarisation of employment and work conditions, as the latter makes employees vulnerable to blackmailing in the first place. This regulatory modus, inscribed in a regime of subjectified Taylorism (Matuschek et al 2008) and repressive integration (Arthus 2008), causes further precarisation as vulnerability exposes employees to a tendency of unlimited and unsustainable labour requirements. Such unlimited labour requirements and forced availability effectively produce such constant necessity of self-activation as it is pointed out by Dörre and Armano as central for generating experiences of precarisation - also within strictly controlled, repetitive, and low qualified kind of service labour.

Additional destabilisation is caused by the instable character of flexibility or other work arrangements achieved on this informal and individualised basis. Both increasing labour requirements and unstable work arrangements reflect employees' precarious power positions in such individualised, informal, personalised labour relations. Analysis here clearly points to what Castel calls "negative individualisation": In combination with unstable and insecure work and employment conditions, and under the absence of protective collective norms, individualisation becomes a fundamental source for vulnerability and precarisation (Castel 1995: 18). Increasing labour requirements might derive from the flexibilisation, as well as from the extension and intensification of work times and tasks. In fact, not only the flexibility of employment contracts and conditions, but also the continuous, inflexible exposure to unsustainable work times, tasks, and loads renders employees' future, long-term capacities to reproduce their labour power uncertain.

There are a variety of different fields of conflicts that might also only indirectly relate to flexibility issues, but which all produce experiences of precarisation. To a great length, these various issues, and especially the extension and intensification of labour, represent classic workplace conflicts. They are nothing new, exclusively produced by a new, Post-Fordist work organisation. But, within a workplace regime of subjectified Taylorism, they gain in relevance and severity. They get newly articulated and focalised, namely around the issues of flexibility, self-regulation, and participation. As linked to the issues of flexibility regulations and labour control, precarisation consequently reveals itself as concerning, producing and combining conflicts regarding both the extent of labour requirements and the issue of self-determination.

Beyond the wide range of aspects and linked conflict fields, precarisation in the interviews considered here displays itself as a generalised, though gradual process. It touches upon all

the different contract-defined groups of temporary and permanent, part-time and full-time employees. In other words, the analysis sustains the thesis of an increase of precarious work conditions also within permanent, and even full-time employment relations, and of precarisation as a 'normal' state of labour in capitalist society.

In order to trace the gradual and, at the same time, generalised character of these precarisation processes, I will briefly summarise the different forms of destabilisation and vulnerability that are raised in this analysis with regard to different groups of employees with different employment statuses. Temporary employment is experienced in all four firms by all but three interviewees with fixed-term contracts as strongly precarious, especially with regard to blackmailing pressures on temporal flexibility.<sup>198</sup> Once permanent employment is reached, such blackmailing on work times, shift changes, and overtime hours is perceived by part of the interviewed part-time employees as less problematic, while for other part-timers, the experience of forced availability remains highly relevant also in a permanent employment position. This latter situation occurs especially in firms G and I, as is shown later on. In this, insufficient part-time hours and wages result as the primary reason for part-timers' experiences of precarisation.

Above all, the analysis shows that even permanent full-time employment positions are described by employees themselves as precarious, be it due to their low wages, limited professional growth prospects, 'bad' regular stable work times, or disliked and/or informal work tasks. In other words, permanent full-time employees also continue to suffer from blackmailing. Work times seem to be the only conflict field for which a permanent employment position reduces experiences of precarisation.<sup>199</sup> However, as some part-time and temporary employees also experience only limited (temporal) blackmailing pressures, the

---

<sup>198</sup> While only five out of 19 interviewees currently have temporary contracts, all other employees in the sample obtained their current permanent part-time or full-time contracts only after a more or less extensive period of casual employment within the same firm. The three employees that do not present temporary contracts as precarious (Luis/I, Luca/C1, Daniele/G), currently are in permanent employment positions and consider acquisition of this status as a result of personal merit. The role of such self-perceptions and concepts of merit as coping practices is further elaborated in the following chapter.

<sup>199</sup> This appears to be more strongly related to the full-time rather than to the permanent character of employment, or, only to a combination of both. Beyond full-time employees' less precarious employment status and their consequently reduced vulnerability to blackmailing, they are exposed to less effective flexibility requests than part-timers as they are not in the focus of management's flexibilisation strategies. As indicated above, informal work time flexibility beyond the formal shift patterns is necessarily relatively limited for full-time employment, due to the high amount of regular working hours to be distributed across the week. Moreover, across all the cases, full-timers are often employed to cover the key periods of opening times, while part-time employment is used to cope with variable customer affluence. An outlier with regard to the limited extent of time related conflicts is the full-time employee D12-A. For her, conflicts occur less in terms of shift patterns than regarding informal and unpaid daily 'mini-overtime' necessary to close the cash desks and to serve the final customers.

type of employment contract cannot be the only reason for such experiences of reduced vulnerability.<sup>200</sup>

For permanent full-time employees, experienced pressures shift from issues of temporal to functional flexibility, work tasks, and professional growth, both in terms of skill and wage development. They concern the economic conditions of existence as well as the realisation of work related expressive interests within the work process. Less than for temporary and/or part time employees, resulting conflicts focus on the temporal conditions of self-management, regarding daily work, and reproduction needs, and thus, the daily work-life balance. But, permanent full-time employees are equally exposed to the adverse effects of individualised and informalised flexibility regulations and labour relations, as they are similarly vulnerable to blackmailing with regard to both wage and work process related interests. And they are also affected by the intensification and extension of labour requirements. According to the data at hand, these latter issues represent a central field of conflict especially for permanent full-time employees. In other words, there is a second shift in conflict experiences from direct to indirect flexibility related issues, as well as towards questions of labour control and participation.

With respect to the presented empirical material, arguing in favour of such a widely generalised trend of precarisation should not be misunderstood as indicating any homogenisation of work experiences or a levelling out of differences between the various groups of employees. Of course, employees' different specific power positions within individualised, informalised labour relations matter for the degree of vulnerability experienced. These power positions depend to a large extent on the respective employment status. As such, they are obviously linked to the form of employment contract and the security and stability the latter provides. In addition, they also depend on informal workplace positions acquired by means of availability demonstrations, established personal relations with superiors, appropriated or transmitted additional work tasks and responsibilities, etc.

Yet, in light of the broad and diversified experiences of precarisation, any hierarchical, contract-focussed ranking of employee groups, according to their different degrees of precarisation, should be perceived as a fluent constellation without too rigid boundaries between the different categories. This is necessary to take account of the processual character of precarisation as well as the differences in employees' everyday experiences, which occur even within every single contract-related group. Any rigid, contract-focussed categories

---

<sup>200</sup> For this reason, the section 7.4 considers additional differentiations, namely firm specific regulatory patterns and further social categories of differences characterising individual employees.

would hardly be apt to reflect the overlapping precarising effects of individualised informal flexibility regulations, the respective mechanism of forced availability, and thus, the specific mode of labour control in place.

Instead, the task is to analyse precarisation not only as an objective, structurally defined status, but to consider it from the perspective of subjective experiences. With regard to employees' action potential (which are the focus of the research question), such a subjective perspective is of central interest. As the empirical analysis shows, employees' experiences of precarisation do not refer to any fixed state of deprivation, but to a step by step loss of previously obtained, or the exclusion from prospective securities and stabilities. This argument does not mean to negate any structural grounding and differentiations, but to underline the gradual and processual character of precarisation, as well as the relevance of subjective perceptions for the functioning and the dynamics of this process. It is already the perceived state of relative, even transitory uncertainty that makes employees vulnerable to blackmailing.

As indicated above, Castel's and Dörre's classification of different zones of integration-disintegration goes an important step in the direction of acknowledging subjective experiences (Castel 1995, 2005; Dörre 2004; Dörre et al 2006; Castel/Dörre 2009). Yet, it still results in the establishment of distinct, also and contract-related, employee types. Instead, the proposal here is to group subjective experiences of precarisation according to the different objective, structural fields of conflicts they emerge around. The aim in this is to guide the analysis to structural reasons, that is the different modes of regulation by which experiences of precarisation and respective conflicts are structured. This links the analysis more closely to the labour process rather than to the individual employment status, and is perceived here as a necessary step to inquire into fields of possible (workplace) struggles over enhanced action potential. Additionally, this conflict focus aims to more adequately reflect the processual and multidimensional character of precarisation experiences themselves. As it allows for a location of individual employees simultaneously into different fields of conflicts, without the need to narrow down possibly ambiguous (self-)positionings to any contradiction-free ranking of different employee types.<sup>201</sup>

---

<sup>201</sup> In Castel's and Dörre's model, each zone of integration-disintegration refers to distinct employee groups. These are defined not only by a set of specific employment contracts, but also by wage and qualification levels. Nonetheless, the multidimensionality and processual character of precarisation experiences that can be accounted for in the scheme remains limited. While employees might traverse different zones of integration throughout their employment history and life course, in each single moment they represent one specific, coherent type of either primary or secondary integration practices. (See sections 3.2.2 and 3.4.1 for a description of the model of integration-disintegration.) The proposed critical approach towards typifications does not imply that differentiations between different employee groups, particularly their social positions, would not be of interest. On the contrary, such a differentiation is presented in section 7.4. Without taking it as a basis for establishing employee types, but as relevant additional level of analysis and tool for explaining specific combinations of

The value of such a process becomes even more visible with the analysis of employees' coping practices. Such a distinction of conflict fields and coping practices (rather than employee types) helps to overcome the control-resistance divide of the labour process debate. On this backdrop, the analysis of precarisation experiences and coping practices can effectively address employees' different subjective yet socially grounded reasons for agency. As argued above, instead of taking employees' accounts on precarisation as given, this requires engaging in a critical analysis of meaning constructions in their function as coping practices. The focus on conflict fields serves as a necessary basis and catalyser for such a critical analysis.

Consequently,, a wider set of subjective categories of differentiation is considered for analysing differences in employees' experiences of precarisation, other than just the employment contract. In section 7.4, these differences are linked to (a) the concrete work contexts and (b) employees' social positionings. Regarding the work context, differences addressed are the precise form of company specific strategies of flexibilisation and labour control, the resulting modus of flexibility regulations, the mix of numerical, temporal, and functional flexibility that it entails, as well as the state of labour relations and collective interest representation in place in each of the considered firms. Regarding employee characteristics, experiences of precarisation appear as very subjective matters in the interviews conducted for this study, or as different subjective perceptions of similar formal employment conditions.

### 7.3.2 Generalised requirements and aspirations in self-regulation and participation

Before turning attention to individual case and employee differences, a few conclusions can be drawn about the second central field of conflict: participation and control. Clearly, requirements and aspirations for self-regulation play an important role for employees' conflict experiences. The empirical findings, thus, sustain the hypothesis of an equally generalised process of subjectification taking place in the context of low qualified, standardised service labour and a control regime of repressive integration. Next, these findings with regard to self-regulation are summarised, distinguishing between requirements and employee experiences.

---

conflict experiences, such differentiation and comparison would have been even more relevant in a cross-sector perspective. In this respect, it should be noted that Dörre's and Castel's level of analysis is a different one, focussing on different forms and strategies of integration-disintegration across the population and not on everyday workplace conflicts in one specific sector.



On this backdrop, both the effectiveness of management strategies of labour control and employees' action potential in relation to these control strategies are addressed .

Summarising the management demands, multiple requirements for self-regulation within the labour process can be deduced from the mix of management strategies of flexibilisation and subjectification. First, employees are expected to behave as self-responsible firm actors with regard to flexibility arrangements through their 'voluntary', self-responsible realisation of their management's availability requests, be this in terms of flexibility, extension or intensification of labour processes. Second, employees have to guarantee customer satisfaction, contribute to the amelioration of production (or service) processes, ensure the development of their own individual competencies and integrate themselves in a competitive team. The analysis has shown that, within an overall hierarchical work organisation, even limited economic decentralisation at the level of department heads produces further informal responsabilisation for regular staff. Superiors hand down pressures of goal-attainment that they experience through flexibility requests in order to achieve the required ratio of turnover to labour costs.

Beyond such demands for self-control in the work process, requirements of self-regulation also occur on the two further levels distinguished in Pongratz' and Voß' 'entmployee' concept (Pongratz/Voß 2003: 20): 'Self-management' is needed by employees to deal with effects which pressures of forced availability in their wage work have on the rest of their life. They need to be able to establish a balance between both spheres which allows reproducing their labour power as a flexible workforce. Such 'self-management' requires dealing with flexible work times and overtime hours, the long term (un)sustainability of precarious part-time employment, its lacking professional growth prospects and insufficient income. 'Self-marketing' with respect to the personal labour market value, in the cases at hand, particularly touches upon internal markets and professional growth perspectives within the same firm. The latter are linked to availability demonstrations, and thus, to self-control and self-management in the two other spheres.

Turning towards employees' conflict experiences, their criticisms towards management control focussed on the issues of participation and autonomy, both in terms of rejecting hierarchical direction and denouncing fake participatory offers. The interesting thing here is that conflicts around participation result from subjectifying, indirect forms of labour control, as well as from classical and Neo-Taylorist means of direct control and supervision.

Employees' demands for participation comprise very different aspects. They range from doing significant work and establishing meaningful, friendly, non-authoritarian social relations at the workplace to professional growth and personal skill development, autonomy within the work process, participation in the work organisation, and recognition for one's own production knowledge. Finally, they want their own, also non-work, interests to be respected by the firm. These requests for different forms of participation express a desire to feel part of a collective (work) process and give meaning to one's work. Such hopes were found not only within a context of low qualified labour and a Neo-Taylorist work organisation, but also across all contract-defined groups of employees. That is, they are present even among temporary employees who are usually considered as less inclined to get involved in their work environment and to get attracted by participatory management strategies of integration.

Above all, demands for and conflicts over participation and autonomy appear as closely linked to employees' experiences of flexibility. Both conflict issues are strongly interrelated in employee struggles for their own control over work conditions, work processes, and organisation. This issue of own control represents the driving force behind all of the described conflicts. As was pointed out with regard to the different flexibility levels of employment status, work times, and work tasks, employees do not reject the notion of flexibility as such. But, they complain about the conditions of this flexibility: about their own lacking influence and control over concrete flexibility arrangements, the unlimited character of flexibility requirements, as well as the lacking payoff of their availability given to firm's requests. Thus, participation appears to be a central issue in flexibility-related conflict experiences. Employees' demands for increasing their own control simultaneously address (a) the issue of terms and limits of labour requirements, (b) flexibility and stability needs deriving from the private-life sphere (including specifically reproductive needs and duties), and (c) interests in participation and their own decision power in the work process.

Consequently, employees do not simply reject management's offers of participation, but complain about the limited or fake character of these offers, and criticise management's direct control and top-down decision making powers. As demonstrated here, employees do want to get involved, they want to have a say in decision processes, they want to be able to act as responsible company actors, and have a voice in and influence on their work conditions.

The central aspects of conflicts revealed here are at the heart of the transformation problem: They speak to the role of employees' interests outside the work environment and their full subjectivity within and for the labour process; and they question the control over the terms of

labour requirements and exploitation, the distribution of decision powers, and the selective integration of specific subjective labour capacities.

This rediscovery of the ‘old’ transformation problem points to the fact that the functioning of labour control and workforce alignment remains highly ambiguous and brittle, also or especially in a context of a ‘new’, self-regulation-oriented workplace regime of subjectified Taylorism. While employees’ desires for participation, cooperation, and responsibility make them interested in management’s subjectifying strategies, their participatory attitudes cannot be reduced to a simple, one-sided internalisation of management goals and requests. In contrast, the interviews showed that it is precisely the strength of employees own aspirations in participation, in combination with the contrasting experiences of precarisation and blackmailing, that makes participatory forms of labour control problematic, as it does not ultimately meet these aspirations.

Employees’ accounts reveal how, beyond any participatory offers, the encountered generalised, encompassing requirements of self-regulation are always enforced by hierarchical control and coercion: blackmailing, rules for conduct and appearance, open and hidden supervision, obligations to participate in responsabilising initiatives such as performance evaluations, blacklists of anti-firm attitudes, etc. From this perspective, the realisation of self-responsible attitudes and integration appears to be based on coercion, precarising individualisation, and forced internalisation of labour requirements rather than on any effective ‘empowerment’, (organisational) decentralisation or ‘self-interested’ identification with firm goals.

This affirmation does not reduce the relevance of participatory, subjectifying forms of labour control (or of employees’ intrinsic interests in such participation). On the contrary, instead of any contradiction between direct and indirect forms of labour control, this analysis of employees’ work experiences confirms the effectiveness of the above explained mix of direct and indirect control strategies. In light of the conflict experiences described, this mix appears necessary to produce workforce alignment, or to put it in Gramsci’s terms, to produce consent armoured by coercion. For, none of the analysed individual regulatory strategies alone remains uncontested, and all of them generate conflictive experiences. They need to be mutually backed up by additional measures. On the one hand, there is the necessity to buffer blackmailing pressures with participatory offers. On the other, or responsabilising, subjectifying management strategies depend on disciplinary, hierarchical means in order to enforce selective integration and workforce alignment.

The issue of participation and autonomy remains ambiguous also with regard to employees own aspirations and their action potential. These aspirations can either remain limited to a claim for participation within the given frame of management induced labour requirements. That is, they can be reduced to an effective, though self-interested self-regulation, realising these very same requirements despite their inherent conflictive character. Or, as potentially entailed in the desire for their own control, claims for participation and autonomy can turn into a conflict over effective self-determination going beyond and questioning such a given frame. In this sense, they could result in a struggle for enlarged action potential, pointing at the possibility to change given requirements and altering the aim and direction of participation. This ambiguity reflects the fact that participation is itself used as a means of labour control. It points to the contradictions inherent in the process of subjectification itself, based on a partial integration of employee interests in participation, but aiming at an increased, more efficient self-exploitation of labour.

Thus, the importance interviewees gave to interests in participation and autonomy in general confirms Ferreras' research on supermarket cashiers and their 'democratic aspirations' as well as the wider subject-oriented studies presented above. Yet, such 'democratic aspirations', at least in the cases here at hand, appear as limited to participation within a given frame (of management strategies, economic goals, etc.) - without claiming equal decision power over this frame (as is shown later in more detail).

As regards the erosion of borders between work and life, which figures as a central liberating as well as precarising aspect of rising requirements of self-regulation in the (German) 'entreplooyee' debate, employees' related conflict experiences remain limited.. Aside from the work-life balance, they appear to more greatly concern the limits of labour efforts and the degree of participation, self-determination, and employees' own control within the work process itself.<sup>202</sup>

In contrast to most of the respective literature, the problems and risks of unlimited self-exploitation, motivated and provoked by the internalisation of responsibilities for firm goals and work requirements, do not appear as a central conflict in the interviews conducted for this study. Instead, where they are criticised, requirements of self-regulation are experienced, above all, as pressures towards an increased, forced exploitation of labour capacities – reflecting employees' negative experiences of unlimited flexibility requirements and forced availability. This is due to the fact that, as demonstrated above, such requirements are confronted with the actual distribution of decision powers and lacking real opportunities of

---

<sup>202</sup> Such a work-life balance was not the primary focus of the interviews. Nonetheless, it may have emerged from the open questioning for experienced conflicts, but this happened only to a limited extent.

participation within the labour process. Employees' accounts of everyday work experiences reveal the 'real' terms of control and power positions behind management's indirect control strategies and participatory rhetoric. This might be interpreted as an expression of the specific dynamics of flexibilisation and the particular conflict constellations characteristic of a workplace regime of subjectified Taylorist . The distance between participatory promises and real opportunities is relatively obvious, as flexibilisation relies to an important extent on an extension and intensification of labour requirements. Consequently, it fosters experiences of top-down coercion rather than self-responsible flexibility.

Regarding their own aspirations, employees are interested in having own control over flexibility arrangements in order to protect themselves against unlimited requests from management. But they do not express these interests in own control in terms of wanting to realise their own flexibility interests and needs. This finding can be interpreted as reflecting the dominance of blackmailing experiences in a workplace regime of repressive integration and, more specifically, the limited scope for one's own control inherent in the given flexibility regulations. Yet, such desires for stability and limits of flexible labour requirements do not contradict employees' interests in participation, self-determination, and flexibility. Instead, stability and limits of flexibility and availability constitute objective preconditions for realising any potential of flexibility, autonomy, and one's own control. These potentials are not simply entailed in the new forms of work organisation and labour control, but need to be realised through demands and struggles. Both the processes of precarisation, as well as the limited character of employees own aspirations in participation within the given frame of labour requirements, limit employees' capacities to engage in such struggles. Thus, there is no 'either or' of precarising and participatory effects, of risks and opportunities of flexibilisation and subjectification. In contrast, as the interrelations between respective conflict experiences have shown, both exist simultaneously and influence, but not balance, each other.

From the employee perspective, criticising increased vulnerability and weakened power positions can go hand in hand with claiming participatory and liberating potentials of flexibilised and subjectified Post-Fordist forms of work and employment, as these break with the rigid and normalising Fordist conditioning of workers' lives. Recognising that conflict experiences faced by employees are rooted in struggles over control and participation suggests that the above argument about generalised precarisation does not imply any simple discourse of impoverishment. In the face of flexibilisation and precarisation, employees are not passive victims, but necessarily need to acquire (and possibly struggle for) action potential. They do not simply reject their management's offers and requirements of flexibilisation and

participation. Instead, employees might simultaneously accept these while demanding more real opportunities for own control. Management's strategies of flexibilisation, subjectification, and precarisation, in turn, do not deny action potential, but rather contain and limit it at the same time.

However, employees' experiences are also far from homogeneous with regard to the issues of participation and self-regulation. The following section, therefore, turns to a more detailed analysis of firm and employee differences. Such differences appear as relevant especially with regard to employees' attitudes towards participation.

#### ***7.4 Differentiations: Firm differences and employee characteristics***

Looking in more detail at the described generalised processes of precarisation and subjectification as well as differentiations in employees' conflict experiences, important variations can be found in the degree to which both the issues of labour requirements and participation become conflictive. The following sub-sections underline how employees are impacted by different management strategies of flexibilisation and labour control, as well as by differences in individual employees' social positions and characteristics.

##### **7.4.1 Strong conflict experiences in firm G**

In G, strong employee frustration can be explained by heavy daily flexibility requests and blackmail pressures. These result from management's strategy of flexibilisation, as it is strongly based on a combination of part-time and frequent, extremely irregular overtime work. A high level of discontent is due to the sample composition. The sample contains only young interviewees (aged 23 to 27) who already have a considerable employment history in that same firm (four to seven years). They are all in a period of their life course where employment stabilisation and professional growth to full-time employment is crucial for them to be able to have their own lives and families independently from their parents. At the same time, they already possess sufficient employment experience to be frustrated about lacking growth perspectives within their firm, as well as lacking alternatives on the external labour market. In contrast to their older colleagues, they seem to possess more energy to struggle over and voice their discontent. Or, at least they perceive a stronger need for such a struggle, given that they still have most of their work lives ahead of them and haven't yet obtained the same standards and protections as older employees, which they would also like to have.

*Eric: Big struggles. No destructions, to do and to undo. In the whole area of Milan, our company might have, I don't know, we are 50 employees, there are at least 40 shops, maybe more, lets say 3000 employees: Bring them all in a manifestation into the centre, right at the headquarters of G, in order to finally make them understand something! (Eric/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G)*

*Mario: I'll tell you the truth: last year we've had the elections for shop stewards. If I could go back in time, I would present myself as a candidate, too. (...) To try, because I think that's something that makes you understand what your rights really are, how you can move, what are the just things, what you have to do. Especially as I see the situation now. And then, I could also help some colleagues and maybe make them understand what's the situation, that we have to move something! (Mario/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm G)*

Regarding employees' attitudes towards participation and labour control, the focus of conflicts here is in the individualisation of labour relations and the limited opportunities for individuals to have a voice. These are perceived as directly linked to the mechanism of forced availability and the experiences of precarisation and vulnerability. Management's strategies of decentralisation and firm culture initiatives are met with less criticism, despite employees equally strongly voiced aspirations in qualification, autonomy, and their own control. They are also least pronounced in comparison to the other firms under study. But, responsabilisation effectively takes place on a more informal, department-oriented level of daily work organisation – given management's strategy of 'departmentalism' and also the small outlet size. Employees' ability to be involved in participatory management practices are much less than in other cases that aim at better opportunities for self-regulation or require playing the role of a self-responsible firm actor (enacting firm interests). Such opportunities might be obtained through a more effective decentralisation and more comprehensive firm culture initiatives, but informally they are already present as a daily requirement rather than as an opportunity. Instead, such claims are much more clearly expressed as a desire for one's own control over work conditions.

*Eric: Practically, every Tuesday the department heads have a meeting with the director and they calculate the economic results. (...)The department heads transmit the results to the staff in their department, but in an informal way. (...) For example, they come to us and repeat what the director has told them, like: Look, this week our department used too many work hours, compared to the turnover we made. So, you have to take some holidays next week, so that we can make our balance re-enter. Well, my idea about all that stuff is, that it's really not that they can tell me when I have to take my holidays,*

*just because it fits their balances. It's me who should get to decide (Eric/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

Consequently, conflicts and especially experiences of precarisation, are interpreted as resulting from a hierarchical workplace regime, characterised by a superior's arbitrary and disciplining decision making power and dominated by profit, cost, and efficiency oriented firm interests. Mechanisms of direct control and supervision are met with relatively strong disapproval here. Adhering to a firm culture is conflictive less in terms of (the limited scope of) management initiatives (such as firm dinners, trips, surveys on performances and corporate identity), but with regard to the real shop floor atmosphere and social relations among colleagues experienced daily. These are strongly experienced and criticised as negatively affected by mistrust and cheating.

#### 7.4.2 Strong conflict experiences for older employees in firm I

In I, in contrast, it is medium-aged employees who experience their employment status as most problematic. While being older than their equally strongly frustrated colleagues in G (aged 32 to 38), they have the same length of employment history in their current job and firm (four to seven years) in common. Thus, they share the same experience of constantly blocked professional growth, precarious part-time labour, and futile availability demonstrations towards the firm's flexibility requests.

*Giuseppe: Let's say, there is a group of those who are easy to find, in the sense that they call you at home. It's those who are always available, they call you 10 minutes before and you go. But, I'm not part of that category any longer. (...) the first years I did that, too. (...) But by now, I don't think that I will ever gain any more additional weekly hours, to reach 34 for example. No, I'm not new here. When things don't change after a bit, nothing moves, then you only risk becoming depressed, sulk, to work in a negative way. This is not what I want. (...) My idea is to go really far away, to do my own business. (Giuseppe/permanent part-time contract, stock operator, firm I).*

Their relatively more advanced age additionally fosters disillusionment, especially regarding growth perspectives within their current job. It increases the burden of still not having reached an employment status that pays for a (decent) life. Regarding the importance of the regulatory context, the management strategy of offering increased part-time hours only on an informal and temporary basis without fixing such increases in the employment contract, increases the



pressure's felt by employees and adds to their disillusionment and frustration. With this strategy, employees are repeatedly given hope in one day, step-by-step, reaching full-time employment. But, they are never given any security. For our interviewees, this continuous lack of security and the constant experiences of blackmailing end up eroding any individual hope and belief in the firm's rhetoric of flexibility, participation, and merit.

Similar to G, conflicts revolving around these experiences of prolonged precarisation and blackmailing are strongly expressed both in terms of lacking limits of labour requirements and of participation, autonomy, and one's own control. But, in contrast to G, it is not only the individualisation of labour relations that becomes problematic due to the experienced limits of having a voice and action potential in individual informal flexibility negotiations. In addition, management's more pronounced strategies of decentralisation, responsabilisation, and firm culture are met with stronger disapproval. Conflict experiences result from limited actual opportunities of participation (also only as responsible firm actors), as well as from a lacking payoff for the level of availability given. In this, there is some similarity to firm D, which I shares the high degree of participatory management strategies with. The only control level which does not emerge as a conflict field is management's control over customer relations. But this difference to the other cases is easily explained by the sample structure and the fact that the group of older employees in I is composed of warehousemen only, who have at best very limited customer contacts. Possibly for the same reason, also conflict experiences regarding direct control and supervision remain limited. The case-specific, computer-based supervision of work speed and results is limited to sales clerks and cashiers, while supervision in the form of stock registration has always already existed for warehouse labour as part of daily work. Consequently, discontent emerges only with regard to dress codes, experienced as unsuitable for unloading, restocking, and assembling work.

#### 7.4.3 Strong participatory conflicts in firm D

In firm D, employees are frustrated about their employment status due to low wages, lacking professional growth, limited training opportunities (specifically for temporary employees), and the informality of work time flexibility and requests for additional tasks. For a majority of interviewees, conflicts are presented as a question of lacking opportunities for participation and having a limited payoff for adhering to availability demonstrations. In contrast to employees in G and I, these conflicts are not necessarily experienced as linked to any burdens of flexibilisation, forced availability, and blackmailing nor to the conditions and limits of respective labour requirements. The conflict experiences regarding the issue of (misleading)

participation offers occurs in a context of strong, encompassing management strategies of subjectification, namely based on normative control and an equally important individualisation of labour relations. As management's strategies of flexibilisation reach a considerable scope, especially in numerical and temporal terms, objective flexibility requests and blackmailing pressures can also be considered high in this case.<sup>203</sup> Yet, they are not voiced as central conflicts by a majority of employees.

In contrast to the group of older employees in I, the interviewed older and more long term employees here either successfully obtained full-time employment or declare their part-time position as a voluntary choice. This relative satisfaction with their current contractual status reduces their vulnerability to blackmailing in terms of daily flexibility pressures. But, it still leaves wages, professional growth, qualifications, autonomy, and favourable work and flexibility conditions as controversial issues and a potential basis for forced availability. As can be seen in the following quote, the major problem with regard to these issues is not seen in the mechanism of blackmailing as such, but in the limited effectiveness of participatory offers and lacking (economic as well as immaterial) recognition for the level of availability and responsibility that employees demonstrate.

*Alice: I don't see this (having to demonstrate availability and responsibility) as exploitation. If you advance in your career it's because you've merited it. (...) Me too, I want to get somewhere, that's why I have to demonstrate availability. But, if I know that in the end I won't get anywhere anyhow, then I won't bustle. (...) It's not fair that after all these years I'm still at the same official qualification level. They should recognise the experience I've gained during these years, the extra tasks I do, the competences I have (Alice/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm D).*

To make the contrast with employees' frustration about blackmailing and the resulting unlimited labour requirements in G more evident, here are some of the respective interview passages. In these citations, employees clearly refer to the burdens and the coercion resulting from their management's flexibility and availability requests:

*Eric: They do not really oblige you to do them (overtime hours). (...) But, if you say 'no', just once, two or three times maybe, they won't even ask you anymore at all if you want to do any overtime. Because, for*

---

<sup>203</sup> As described above, indirect control strategies in D comprise a strong rhetoric of individual voice and informal friendly shop floor relations between employees and superiors, frequent firm culture initiatives, as well as various responsabilising mechanisms such as one-to-one performance evaluations or department rankings. Flexibilisation is based on a high amount of temporary and part-time employment, and a strong flexibility of work times, in terms of both irregular formal shift patterns and additional informal spontaneous adjustments and shift changes.

*them, you would have proved not being a reliable person. They already put the cross on you ...'*  
(Eric/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G).

*Mario: Now, if you want to do any overtime, often you have to sacrifice your whole day. Mostly, I work early in the morning. But then, they ask me to do overtime in the late afternoon. Like that, you finish regularly at 1 p.m., and then you have to come back at 4 p.m. Really, you have to sacrifice your whole day. Honestly, that's impossible, maybe one day you have a family; or even if you only want to spend some time with your partner (Mario/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

Turning back to firm D and its now permanent employees in this sample, criticisms of lacking and fake participatory offers include all sorts of labour control, from decentralisation, firm culture initiatives, individualised labour relations, and individual voice opportunities with their supervisors. In opposition to firm G and older employees in firm I, these criticisms are united by a common demand for greater opportunities to act and present oneself as a self-responsible firm actor, and for being recognised as such. Less explicitly, they call for their own control over flexibility and work conditions.

Experiencing conflicts associated with participation and lacking recognition of her contributions was also expressed by a more recently hired temporary employee (Laura, sales clerk) in this sample. In other words, such conflicts crosscut different types of employment. This underlines the relevance of each firm's unique characteristics, in this case, it lies in the wide scope and the specific form of management's participatory strategies.

Conflict experiences are not identical for all interviewees of this case. Outliers are the two permanent part-time employees, one working at the cash desk (Valentina) and the other as a sales clerk (Stefania). The former, in addition to expressing strong disapproval of fake participation offers, equally strongly criticises experiences of blackmailing and unlimited requests for flexible labour efforts. The latter, considered to be among the 'relatively satisfied employees,' in contrast, does not consider her employment status as conflictive, but presents her part-time employment as a lifestyle choice motivated by a desire to minimise work time. She appreciates working time flexibility and informal, individual, and spontaneous flexibility negotiations as an opportunity to better adapt work times to leisure activities. Yet, both women complain about the loss of such autonomy margins and previously acquired capacities of self-regulation. As for interviewees in G and older employees in I, their criticism of lacking actual opportunities for participation points to experiences of limited self-control over flexibility arrangements.

#### 7.4.4 Limited conflict experiences in firm C

In C, conflicts regarding the employment status, as well as the flexibility of work times and tasks are given less importance in employees' stories. The low wages, lacking professional growth opportunity, and vulnerability to blackmailing are equally mentioned as minor problems (the latter especially by employees from outlet C2). This difference from the other cases can be explained by differences in management's flexibility strategies and the particular employee characteristics. As indicated above, numerical flexibility is less frequent in C. The employee interviews at this company revealed that there are also less daily flexibility pressures exercised on permanent employees, both in a temporal and functional sense. Instead, this management's strategy focusses on a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion in or from the 'company family.' This consists of a differentiated treatment for flexibility requests among permanent and temporary employees, combined with targeted pressures on so-called "negative" employees: As seen above, temporary employment, including seasonal and agency labour, is used strategically for filling up holes in the workforce coverage and to cover longer opening times. Temporary employees are thus exposed to stronger and more constant flexibility requests. In addition, different strategies are applied to mark and exclude those employees who, according to management's judgement, are less willing to integrate into the firm logic and/or do not demonstrate 'sufficient' work performance and availability to the management's (flexibility) requests. An example is holding special departmental assemblies to which only 'negative' employees are requested and in which they are reminded of work duties and the corporate philosophy. Flexibility pressures - requests for spontaneous shift changes, extremely short notice for overtime, disadvantaged allocation of work times, denial of employees' preferences and flexibility requests – are largely focussed on this group. The 'in-group' of 'successfully' integrated employees appears to be generally left in peace. The above described 'positive' participatory offers, such as the opportunities of voicing individual concerns through informal, friendly relations with superiors, are oriented towards this fraction of the workforce.

Interviewees from shop C1 belong to this 'in-group.' While themselves experiencing only reduced requests for flexibility, they appear to be quite ignorant about pressures exercised on other colleagues, although they all passed through an initial period of temporary employment within the same firm, which two out of three remember as highly precarious due to strong vulnerability to blackmailing. For these employees, current permanent part-time employment appears as conflictive only with regard to its low wage, but it is not linked to blackmailing. Very limited problems equally result with regard to the work process, in terms of work load

and qualifications. Labour control, participatory offers, and individualisation of labour relations are not perceived as conflictive.

*Cristina: No, absolutely, for me this work is not stressful at all. I like it, the contact with the customers, the atmosphere in the shop, I'm fine with my colleagues, I never had any problem with anybody up to now. Also with our department head, there is a good relation. (...) I don't have any problems with the superiors, on the contrary. (...) Even after we did that court trial to re-enter the firm with a permanent contract, because they'd left us at home after 4 years of temporary contracts. (...) I never felt under pressure, not even while I had a temporary contract. I've always accepted their requests for flexibility. I just did it, that's all. Not because I would have had to demonstrate any availability. (...) Even now, I still do that. If they ask me in the morning to do overtime in the afternoon, maybe I say no. But then, if they call me, I agree: ok, it's all right (Cristina/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C1).*

Stronger, though comparatively still limited conflict experiences, and a higher sensibility for conflicts even where these do not directly concern themselves, can be found among the interviewees from outlet C2. This might be due to differences in the state of collective labour relations in both shops as well as in the sample structure. Thus, C2's position as the historical union stronghold among Milanese hypermarkets can be assumed to foster employees' collective identities and their conflict consciousness. While labour relations in both outlets have recently been deteriorating, this development has been even more radical in C1 where it has led to a complete stop of any collective negotiations and bargaining at the shop level. In C2, access to interviewees was gained through shop stewards of CGIL, the most left-wing union confederation with a more confrontational approach to collective bargaining. In C1, contacts were established through a UIL shop steward, the most right-wing union confederation oriented towards co-management. These different access gates might have influenced the sample structure and the composition of employee attitudes encountered.

Regarding the employee characteristics, there is a mix of all three age groups and different life situations in this firms. The most evident common difference to the other cases is that employees are relatively satisfied with their current employment status, be it because their part-time employment is motivated by their own personal interests (Cristina from C1 and Elena from C2 who both are part-time cashiers and mothers), because they can rely on a second family income (Cristian, C2; Elena, C2; Chiara, C1; Cristina, C1) or still 'happily' live with their parents without considering this situation as an imminent problem (Mimmo, C2; Luca, C1). A further explanation is that some have a relatively shorter employment history in that firm, only recently experienced stabilisation from temporary to permanent employment,

and still are content about this relative success (Chiara/ three years, Cristina/ one year, and Luca/ three years).

There are differences between the outlets C2 and C1: In C2, employees' relative satisfaction with their current employment status in terms of contract and work times (Elena, Cristian) does not entail any overall integration as in C1, but leaves room for criticisms of other aspects of work experiences. This especially concerns the issues of professional growth, qualifications, and autonomy within the work process, the extension of fixed formal work times, as well as the access to, the state of, and mobilisation for collective interest representation. As for the confrontation of firms G and I (-older employees) versus firm D, these differences in the degree of employees' overall sense of conflict go hand in hand with differences in the (non-)perception of conflict fields: In C2, conflicts are perceived with regard to both labour requirements and participation, while in C1 the limited importance of conflicts and the relative employment satisfaction experienced are predominantly interpreted as questions of successful participation and recognition of given availability. In this, C1 is similar to D, with the difference that in D frustration with fake participatory offers is high.

Consequently, also indirect, participatory forms of labour control and management's related discourses themselves emerge as a field of conflict only for employees in C2. As in firm G, their critique is focussed on everyday shop floor relations and cheating among colleagues. A fake firm culture is met with disinterest rather than with demands for more 'real' participatory offers. For interviewees from C2, intrinsic interests in participation are concentrated on the work process, the concrete margins of autonomy, and self-interested skill development linked to the work task, and much less on corporate identity or recognition as responsible firm actors, as is the case in C1. This limited subjective importance of management's corporate identity strategies might reflect the actually more limited use of such measures as compared to firms I and D. As described above, positive participatory offers are focussed here mainly on individual voice and informal, friendly relations with superiors, while in G, effective decentralisation and firm cultural initiatives are less pronounced. Such a limited scope of offers to participate might also reduce the expectations set in them. It might keep frustration of intrinsic participatory interests resulting from fake management discourses low - despite the comparatively strong measures of direct supervision (stronger than for I and D, but less than for G), namely for work speed and breaks, at least for at the cash desks.

The following quotes illustrate this difference between both groups of interviewees in shops C2 and C1.

*Cristian: Before the French company took over our firm, you felt more involved in the work process. Not really esteemed, but you had some autonomy. Now, with the French, there is a total disinterest for human resources. (...) Instead of feeling involved in a process you now feel like a passive part of it. Once, our department head did involve us in the choice of products (technical devices, cell phones). Now it's just like a production chain. Everything arrives already done. Now you don't sell a product because you think it's good, but because you are obliged to sell this and nothing else (Cristian/permanent full-time contract, salesclerk, firm C2).*

*Chiara: I think it's correct, that management tries to make sure that people have a responsible attitude towards work. At least, that way, they also keep an eye on those that are a bit... (who work less). It's just fair that they also say these things (whether the work performance is good or not). Well, then there are those who won't listen. But I think it's correct to do these things. (...) Yes, there are lots of different fears, such as not to make any mistakes with the money. But, I really like that thing of responsibility that you have. They put lots of confidence in you, in the end you are dealing with their money, it's a nice role (Chiara/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C1).*

In slight contrast to the pronounced intrinsic, work task oriented participatory interests expressed by interviewees from C2, customer relations, in contrast to all other cases, result as conflictive for these employees in terms of labour requirements and burdens of emotional labour, and only to a limited degree in terms of their own control over shop floor interactions and service knowledge. In C1, customer relations is the only strong conflict field, but conflicts are experienced here only as resulting from bad customer behaviour, and not as linked to questions of labour control.

An outlier in this case is Mimmo/C2, the only agency worker in this sample, who is decisively dissatisfied with his current employment status not least due to the instability of his contract and the limited possibilities of expressing his views resulting from his intermediate employment position. The sense of frustration expressed by this agency worker was higher than that of his colleagues regarding the overall work experiences, and especially the degree of vulnerability and precarisation. Yet, as for his colleagues, the anger was focussed on the lack of professional growth opportunities, qualifications, and work task definitions, as well as on the state of collective labour relations.

#### 7.4.5 Limited conflict experiences for young employees in firm I

Flexibilisation, subjectification, and the overall work conditions seem to be even less controversial for the second group of young, recently hired employees in firm I who hold extremely short-term temporary contracts of a few months. For these employees in their early twenties and with less than one year of presence in the firm, hopes for future employment stabilisation and growth are still unbroken. While they express clear discontent about their current unstable employment status and especially the low qualification and pay level, they perceive their current job as only a transition phase and a secondary activity used to finance their studies. Such optimism about future development is cushioned by an equally still vivid belief in participatory management strategies, career promises, and the firm culture.

*Maria: This is my first work experience, but this is really a special place, in my opinion. There are few workplaces where you feel so well received and so much integrated in the firm. (...) The firm dinners, going out together and things like that, these are beautiful things. It's a different way to get to know your colleagues. Outside of the workplace you really get to know somebody. To gather like that is great. (...) Yes, we are really all equal. They also told me this, at the department meeting, to be calm, that here everything is done together. Sure, if you have a problem, you need to know how to address a person of a certain position in the hierarchy. But, if you meet this person in the cafeteria, you happen to talk naturally. You eat together, have some small talk from face to face, between two mortal human beings, that makes things nice (Maria/temporary part-time contract, cashier, firm I).*

*Gianni: In 5 years, if I should still be in decathlon, it won't be at the 5th level (of wage and qualification). You have to show yourself, have to be clever, do your work well, find additional solutions where there are problems. And you always have to be available. I saw so many progressing, so I believe in the future. (...) It's really stressful that they renew the temporary contracts only at the last moment. But I hope I'll be employed on a permanent basis. Looking at colleagues, I see that those who stay do so because they are good workers, and because there is a need for additional hours in their department at that moment (Gianni/temporary part-time contract, salesclerk, firm I).*

In firm I, the management's participatory strategies are especially focussed on trying to integrate new employees. Thanks to their hopes and beliefs, these interviewees declare feeling free to reject management's flexibility requests if these do not match their own interests and needs - even though, with regard to their temporary contract, they objectively represent the most precarious and vulnerable group of employees. It remains an open question, whether or to which extent this stated 'freedom' is effectively realised or represents only a verbal



declaration and wishful thinking. Yet, it should be underlined again that such a perception of reduced vulnerability already is an important coping practice. Management's participatory offers, or their actual limited scope, are also not conflictive for these interviewees. Where limited discontent arises, it does so only with regard to actually limited influence on the amelioration of work processes in terms of increased efficiency, or in terms of interviewees requests for gaining self-responsibility and participation in the achievement of firm goals being denied.

Young employees in I contrast their temporary colleague in firm D. D represents a similar case in terms of its high degree of participatory management strategies. But, in opposition to I, the temporary employee there from this sample more strongly criticises and suffers from her at least partial exclusion from participatory offers and especially from training and firm culture initiatives. This stronger frustration might be due to both differences in employee attitudes or in management strategies. The temporary employee in D is older, has a longer though discontinuous employment history in that firm, and struggles to make her living from that part-time job. Temporary employees in I still live with their parents and above all consider themselves as students rather than as workers. Compared to D, social activities to foster corporate identity in I are less costly and spectacular as well as more decentralised on the department level. But, they are equally important and open to all new employees – whereas temporary employees are excluded from trips, assemblies, and training in D. This also holds true for the mechanisms of decentralisation and responsabilisation in place at I (including total quality management), while individualised performance evaluations, as well as participation in formal shop-wide assemblies, are reserved to permanent staff in D. In other words, normative control and responsabilisation in I relies much less on a differentiation between temporary and permanent, young and old employees than in D or C. Instead, they are based on a targeted, temporary integration of an unstable, quickly changing workforce. Below that integrative level of control strategies, mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion based on individual performances and availability similar to those described for C exist as well. Given the high employee turnover, from management's point of view, the creation of such an in-group of confirmed employees as in C might be expected to have less importance than the integration of a contingent workforce.

Compared to interviewees in shop C1, outcomes for young employees in firm I are similar to the limited degree of conflict experienced in their daily work life. Between these two cases there are also some relevant differences. Regarding work times, all but one employee in C are actually exposed to limited flexibility, and thus do not perceive it as a current problem. Young

employees in I, in contrast, express a positive approval of frequently experienced flexibility requests. Also in this case, daily flexibility requirements, which appeared limited for their older colleagues, are focussed on temporary employees. Thus, while limited with regard to normative control, differentiation exists on the level of flexibility requirements. For these young employees, being asked to spontaneously accept overtime shifts appears as a welcome sign of recognition rather than as a burden or a problem of unlimited labour requirements. Beyond company differences, this is also the case for the remaining as yet unconsidered, equally young though less recently hired and now permanent sales clerk in C1 (Luca, two years in the shop).

A different, but similarly positive evaluation of informal flexibility regulations, or at least a compensation for their difficulties, is seen by two permanent part-time cashier in C2 and D (Elena, Alice) in the possibility for changing shifts directly and informally among colleagues, in case of personal need. Opposed to the young employees in I, in this case, the limits of such autonomous flexibility margins are also articulated:

*Elena: There are no problem changing shifts. (...) You just talk to the department head, and they sign the allowance. (...) But you have to find a colleague who does the same hours. And that's not always easy. Because you have to find another part-timer with 24 weekly hours who does the opposite shift to yours, who that day does the hours you would need to do. There it gets a bit more difficult. But up to now, I repeat, I never had any problems (Elena /permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C2).*

*Alice: It's just that it doesn't work very well, changing shifts with colleagues. Because everybody has different time tables, you do 4 hours, he does 5 and a half that day, and another does 6. So, you never find anybody who could exchange at a par (Alice/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm D).*

As one needs to find a colleague with the same amount of contractual hours and the same shift pattern who is willing to change turns, such an exchange becomes a rather difficult undertaking in a context of highly diversified individual work times. But even such limited opportunities for their own control and collective self-management appear to reduce pressures otherwise associated with flexibility requests.

#### 7.4.6 Final comparison

Summing up the case descriptions of the last subsections, the two interrelated issues of flexibilisation/precarisation and participation/control are problematic for at least some employees in all four companies under consideration. But, outcomes differ regarding the degree to which participatory management strategies themselves become a focus of conflicts and the extent to which flexible labour requirements and blackmailing pressures are articulated as a central conflict.

The following exposition sums up the multiple factors that resulted as influential for such differences in employees' conflict experiences. The aim in this is to render the spectrum of relevant context factors visible, as these constitute possible points of intervention in terms of increasing employees' action potentials. The focus is on highlighting how different factors interact, but not on determining a hierarchy between single influential factors. To give a brief overview, the relevant factors discussed in the following are: (a) the appeal of management's offers of participation which strongly depends on employees' individual employment history, their relative job satisfaction, and their position within a work context structured by gendered and racial division lines; (b) specific work task related conflict pressures; and (c) a more or less easy access to collective institutions, experiences and (also cognitive) resources. In a final paragraph, the effects of such differences on the functioning and effectiveness of labour control are discussed.

Where a management's strategies of participation (still) entail a strong appeal for employees, conflicts are either given an overall limited relevance, or they centre around the issue of participation. Experiences of forced availability as an issue of unlimited labour requirements become secondary concerns. This is the case for the mostly satisfied and well integrated interviewees in shop C1 and young employees in I. Shop C1 more specifically appears as an example of the success of management's differentiation strategies, based on mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, and selective opportunities of individual voice and recognition of individual merits. Firm I, with its pronounced indirect control strategies, displays the positive effects of participatory offers and normative management discourses on (young and recent) employees' acceptance of targeted daily flexibility pressures. Such a successful buffering of precarisation conflicts also appears in firm D as another case with strong strategies of subjectification and normative control. Though being disguised here as fake and consequently highly controversial, management's participatory offers still provoke employees' aspirations. While practically not perceived by permanent employees in C1 and young, temporary

employees in I, the burdens of flexible labour requirements and blackmailing are explicitly linked to this criticism of fake participation only by a minority of interviewees in D.

Where participatory offers provoke less or no more appeal, the terms and conditions of labour exploitation, forced availability, and hard labour conditions become a more central conflict. In addition, the overall relevance given to both conflict fields rises.<sup>204</sup> In this, however, also conflicts regarding the extent of labour requirements are experienced in terms of control. Fake participatory offers also remain a field of conflict in these cases. They constitute part of employees' criticism of an authoritarian workplace regime, be it in terms of lacking self-control over flexibility arrangements, forced availability or lacking opportunities for skill development and autonomy within the work process. This occurs namely in firm G with its strong blackmailing pressures but limited degree of participatory management strategies. It also touches on older employees in firm I, in a more participatory context with less daily flexibility pressures on permanent employees, but equally lacking professional growth trajectories and blackmailing. To a lesser extent it regards C2 where participatory management strategies are limited to individual voice and differentiated integration, combined with strongly perceived and criticised processes of standardisation and centralisation of work processes.

The reason for the appeal of participatory management strategies and why labour requirements are perceived as less of a problem, cannot simply be explained by the strength of its management's participatory offers and discourses or with the precise form of flexibility and normative strategies to be found in the firm. Given the differences in employees' conflict experiences between the two more strongly participatory firms, D and I, these result as important but insufficient explanations. Instead, as this analysis shows, differences between employee characteristics, concrete work tasks, and the state of collective labour relations must also be taken into account.<sup>205</sup>

Regarding employee differences, a decisive factor are individuals' employment histories. For, they influence the strength in hoping for future employment stabilisation, growth, and participation (which is high especially among recently hired individuals), or the degree of already realised hopes. Resulting relative satisfaction with the current employment status

---

<sup>204</sup> These differences reflect the different degree of shop stewards' criticism of management's control strategies, which was described as the strongest in those firms with a higher degree of flexibility requirements and precarious employment conditions. That is, criticism of indirect control and flexibility requirements (in terms of labour exploitation) appear to foster each other.

<sup>205</sup> The presented findings confirm and specify the different categories indicated by former subject-oriented research. They point to the linkages between the different aspects, namely between in-house employment histories, management strategies of differentiation, and available collective experiences and conflict articulations.

reduces the sense of conflict around work conditions - even if these entail objective flexibility burdens and actually only limited participatory opportunities.

An important specification is that such relative satisfaction might relate to both employees' formal or informal position within the workplace hierarchy, as well as to the resulting voice opportunities and autonomy margins.<sup>206</sup> Employees' current life situation, age, and gender are equally relevant. Together they influence the present employment satisfaction or discontent through their influence on labour market positions, economic needs (like paying for one's own apartment), reproductive duties, and flexibility or stability needs, as well as one's aspirations in future growth and stabilisation.

No significant differences in the degree of conflict experiences emerged between male and female employees. But, the men in the sample appear to be more dissatisfied with their employment status in terms of lacking professional growth, wages, and skill development. Whereas women's discontent focusses more pointedly on issues of their own control over work conditions, limits of labour requirements, and especially on the temporal coordination of work and reproductive duties. This distinction reflects the unequal, gendered division of reproductive responsibilities and the different, equally gendered expectations linked to men's and women's participation in wage work. In employees' different conflict experiences, the male breadwinner model seems to be (still) deeply anchored, which sees men as primarily responsible for the family income and women's wage work as only minor, secondary income with less need for professional growth (in terms of full-time employment and wage). However, the women in this sample also expressed dissatisfaction about lacking opportunities for professional growth. But, more frequently such concern refers to lacking recognition of actual informal tasks and competencies, rather than lacking opportunities of formal skill development and qualification. In line with this argument, women are the majority of those employees expressing relative satisfaction with their current employment status. Though - or namely because - women's vulnerability to precarisation is objectively higher than that of men, given their exposure to the double burdens of wage and reproductive work, plus their disadvantaged position on gendered, segmented, and segregated labour markets.

---

<sup>206</sup> Also Arthus' study of the transport and catering sectors points to the importance of employment status and length of employment in the same firm for the differentiated targeting of normative control strategies. From the cases here at hand, however, the picture results as more complex than a simple distinction between a more attracted core and a less integrated peripheral workforce (Arthus 2008: 37f).

Only very limited results can be drawn from the interviews in this study about the other common categories of differentiation aside from gender: race and class. The data here refers to one specific class fraction only, low qualified and low paid service employment, and covers only two interviewees with a migration background.<sup>207</sup> Yet, two specific reasons for especially strong experiences of precarisation can be distinguished for this latter group. As seen above, for one of them, especially high vulnerability and limited growth perspectives result from what he perceives as a racist, discriminating division of labour within the firm and management strategies of differentiation based on racial attributes. For the other, experiences of precarisation are increased due to the difficult social position of a migrant within a foreign country. This employee from firm G expressed a lack of available family support (as the family lives in a different country), which is problematic particularly in a family-style welfare regime like the Italian one.

Taking into consideration these multiple levels of differentiations, precarisation results not only as having effects on the whole life. But, the other way round, also employees' life situations and social positions influence experiences of precarisation within the sphere of wage work. These categories of differentiation gain increased relevance for employees' everyday experiences as management's control strategies strongly rely on and foster differentiated treatment, fragmentation, and resulting in- and exclusions.

In sum, all these factors together influence employees' attitudes, interests, and aspirations with regard to the labour relation, as well as the amount and kind of resources for acting and thinking they can draw on in order to cope with precarisation pressures. Consequently, they impact the degree of perceived vulnerability and precarisation as well as employees' aspirations in participation. And, they produce distinct patterns of conflict perception. That is, the different degrees and forms of conflict perception described here are already the results of distinct (cognitive) coping practices. These are analysed in detail in the next chapter. The differences in the distribution and strength of conflict contents indicated here - the different importance given to conflicts regarding labour requirements and/or participation - reveals itself as highly relevant for the analysis of such coping practices. For, they point to differences in employees' meaning constructions and particularly in their concepts of the labour relation - understood as a moral-based fair exchange or as a conflictive interaction marked by interest differences.

---

<sup>207</sup> No relevant differences were neither found with regard to employees' educational background as additional commonly considered categories of differentiation. Yet, this issue was not in the focus of attention in the interviews.

Beyond employees' social positions and respective individual attributes, further aspects of the work context matter for employees' conflict experiences. These concern differences in work tasks and in the state of collective labour relations:

Specific work task related conflict pressures were detected especially with regard to work at the cash desks. These consist in the high degree of supervision, limited margins of autonomy, and high emotional burdens of constant customer contact. Work task related problems for sales clerks and warehouse workers touch less upon the emotional, but more strongly on the physical aspects of the labour process, such as heavy weights or cold environments. But, flexibility and participation related problems are the same across different work tasks.

Case differences touching upon the state of collective labour relations follow the main division line between limited or mostly participation focussed conflict experiences on the one hand and a strong sense of conflict with regard to labour requirements on the other. It can be noted that more conflictive experiences of daily work conditions and flexibility requirements occur in those workplaces where collective labour relations are still in a relatively good (though constantly degrading) state, as in G, I, and C2. It has been argued that the maintenance of some substantial union bargaining power in these cases might foster an overall conflict consciousness in employees. The contrasting situation in C1, with its largely eroded collective in-house labour relations, equally seems to be an influential factor for differences in employee experiences in C2 and C1 (as outlets of one same company). In D consciousness about the conflictive character of labour relations can be expected to be even lower - as this is a practically non-unionised firm with no collective bargaining but rather an internal management-induced, integration-oriented conflict settlement body.

Even more relevant for employees' daily conflict experiences might be the contrast between shop stewards' strategies and attitudes towards precarisation and fragmentation. As described above, it is the same for G, C2, and I that shop stewards articulate deliberate strategies to foster workforce unity, to address the issue of precarisation and to integrate especially young and temporary employees into their activities. Nothing like this was mentioned by shop stewards in C1. Employees here perceive a major separation between their own relatively secure and satisfying employment positions and memories of their own temporary employment or the problems of current colleagues who have been hired on a temporary basis. Finally, young employees demonstrating limited conflict experiences in I are themselves currently completely excluded from collective interest representation. Yet, they accept this as a normal, transitory condition of temporary employment.

In a word, a higher degree of conflict consciousness regarding the limits of labour requirements appears precisely in those workplaces with stronger collective labour relations and better opportunities for daily collective experiences. Within such contexts, differences between employee groups are due to the differentiated access to collective institutions which depends on the employment status.

Having thus widely elaborated the divers multiple factors that only together account for the differences in employees' conflict experiences, the last argument to be addressed here is the question how all these differences impact the effectiveness of labour control. First of all, the success of management participatory, subjectifying strategies necessarily appears as partial. In fact, conflicts do not vanish completely, not even in those cases where the buffering of precarisation experiences through means of indirect control is effective. While part of the workforce is integrated, frustration about work conditions and empty promises of participation and growth is mutually increased for the less integrated fractions of the work force. That is the case in the interviews especially for older employees in I. But this can be expected to occur also for temporary and/or otherwise excluded employees in C1.<sup>208</sup> In other words, differentiation strategies foster integration only in a selective way for part of the work force.

Second, differentiation strategies work only temporarily. As the contrast between young employees in firms I and G shows, participatory management strategies, informal individualised flexibility regulations and forced availability remain less conflictive only where employees have had less time to recognise the fake character of participatory offers and growth promises, and where they have not yet experienced frustration about the constant pressures of unlimited labour requirements. In these cases claims for own control as opposed to management's offers of participation are less pronounced. That is, integration functions due to not yet emerged differences between the firm's and their own interests, or thanks to limited concessions made by management, such as the successful employment stabilisation obtained by employees in the 'in-group' in C1.

Third, flexibility conflicts are transferred and shifted in their focus rather than dissolved. As argued above, employees' positive aspirations in management's strategies of flexibilisation and participation also risk increasing conflicts, namely rendering participation itself conflictive. The outcomes for firm D and older employees in I, and to a lesser extent also for G, underline these, from management's perspective, critical aspects of indirect labour control

---

<sup>208</sup> However, no contacts could be established in this shop to this workforce fraction due to the widespread fear to participate in any interviewing, present especially among the most precarious employees.



and subjectification. Moreover, limited perceived flexibility pressures do not completely prevent work times from resulting as conflictive in C or in I. Instead, it is in these cases, for employees in C1 and for older employees in I, that the extension and allocation of formal, fixed work times causes the most discontent.

Finally, frustration with limited real margins of participation fosters a very classic, economic side of conflicts about the terms and conditions of labour exploitation: wages. This is the case especially for permanent full-time employees in D. It is for them that discontent with fake participation offers is linked most clearly with a sharp criticism of lacking recognition of labour efforts in terms of economic participation and wages. In other words, classical, seemingly only ‘instrumental’ interests in payment re-appear as a central conflict field even in the most participatory of the cases at hand. But, they are voiced here under the form of an ‘expressive’ interest in recognition. This example again shows that instrumental and expressive interests are no oppositions, but strongly interlinked. Moreover, there clearly is no loss in relevance for ‘instrumental,’ economic interests in the context of subjectifying, participatory management strategies.

*Table 12: Differences in the strength and focus of conflict experiences per firm*

	<b>Conflict field 1: flexibility and labour requirements</b>	<b>Conflict field 2: participation</b>
<b>Strong conflict experiences</b>	I-old G	I-old: own control G: own control D: recognition
<b>Medium conflict experiences</b>	C2	C2: own control
<b>Weak conflict experiences</b>	D C1 I-young	C1: recognition I-young: recognition

*Table 13: Different conflict experiences and employee characteristics*

<b>Employee characteristics</b>	<b>Fields of Conflict</b>	
	<b>Flexibility and labour requirements</b>	<b>Participation</b>
<b>Older employees / longer employment history in that firm</b>	strongly perceived precarisation in terms of vulnerability and lacking payoff of availability	frustration about fake participatory offers (either in terms of their own control or recognition)
<b>Young employees / short employment history in that firm and/or relative satisfaction and strong workplace integration</b>	weakly perceived precarisation	no conflict, but belief in recognition, merit, and corporate identity
<b>Women</b>	work-life balance as most conflictive	recognition of informal competences/tasks as most conflictive issue
<b>Men</b>	lacking wage increases	limited professional growth/qualification as most conflictive issue

## 7.5 Summary

This section sums up the results of this chapter. For this purpose, it links the empirical outcomes to the Schütz's categories of thematical, motivational and interpretational relevance. The aim is to point to the processes of meaning construction, which lie behind employees' conflict experiences and which are analysed in detail in the following chapters.

Both management strategies of flexibilisation and subjectification gain thematic relevance for employees' everyday work experiences in the sense that they emerge from the interviews as conflictive topics requiring interpretation. The consequence of both of these management strategies, rendering them conflictive from employees' eyes, is the generalised though gradual process of precarisation they induce. This process of precarisation is experienced as

problematic by all contract related groups of employees, though in different degrees and forms. It covers a wide range of aspects of work and employment conditions.

Beyond management's strategies of flexibilisation, the informal, individualised modus by which flexibility arrangements are regulated in daily shop floor interactions appears as the main driving force of this precarisation process. As explained in chapter six, this regulatory modus is produced by the combination of an authoritarian workplace regime with various normative, participatory and responsabilising forms of indirect control and an individualisation of labour relations. In combination with unstable, insecure, and insufficient employment positions (in terms of contract duration, income, and professional growth), this produces a mechanism of forced availability and a strong vulnerability of employees to blackmailing pressures. Such pressures arise from management's requests of temporary and functional flexibility, but also from very classic forms of extension and intensification of labour requirements. The latter are induced by longer shop opening times, unpaid daily informal, short overtime, reduced break times and staff shortage, increasing work load and standardisation and, as well as informal additional task.

These encompassing and generalised experiences of precarisation collide with employees' work and life related intrinsic interests. They contradict employees' desire for clearer limits of labour requirements; and they violate aspirations in secure and reliable prospects and rules for the development of work and employment conditions. Finally, experiences of precarisation go against employees' claims for greater opportunities of participation and self-regulation within the work process.

In Schütz' terms, these different violated interests gain motivational relevance for conflict experiences, in the sense that they motivate employees' complaints and criticism of their current work and employment conditions. It has been underlined that such complaints do not simply express a rejection of management's strategies of flexibilisation and subjectification as such. Instead, they are united by a common claim for their own control over labour conditions and flexibility arrangements, as well as for recognition as self-responsible, autonomous firm actors and whole persons who possess both work and life needs, and, consequently, simultaneous interests in flexibility and stability. Concurrently, the analysis showed that management strategies of flexibilisation and precarisation, even in a context of restrictive, Neo-Taylorist subjectification, produce encompassing, generalised requirements of self-regulation at all three levels of self-control, self-management, and self-marketing. That is, the analysis illustrates a central role played by issues of participation, recognition, and self-

regulation for both employees' conflict experiences and management's strategies of labour control. It was demonstrated how both experiences of precarisation and requirements of self-regulation affect employees' whole life, as well as how they regard different interest spheres including the work process, the daily work-life balance, as well as the employment biography and the life course.

Beyond the generalised experiences of precarisation and the encompassing and interlinked character of conflict motivations, significant differences were discovered in the degree to which precarisation, in terms of unlimited labour requirements and fake participatory management strategies, become relevant in employees' everyday experiences. Little experiences of conflict are expressed by those employee groups which are especially targeted by management's differentiated strategies of participation; and by those who have less access to collective agency and support. In contrast, conflict experiences are high for the more marginalised employee groups in the workplace hierarchy; and where collective resources are more easily available (in shops with relatively effective collective bargaining and some commitment of shop stewards to the issue of precarisation). Moreover, differences are due to employees' social positions. Relevant for this are their individual employment histories and current life situations (such as their life course stage and social (care) commitments), as well as their (also informal) place within the workplace hierarchy. Where management's participatory strategies (still) have a strong appeal, conflict experiences also regarding labour requirements and overall work conditions are low - and vice versa. Such appeal has been found especially among recent, young, temporary employees (who still believe in management's participatory rhetoric and future professional growth), and some relatively satisfied female permanent part-time employees with (a) consolidated positions in the workplace hierarchy and (b) families (with children and/or male main breadwinners). In turn, strong conflict experiences (regarding both unlimited labour requirements and fake offers of participation) are particularly fostered by prolonged experiences of precarisation, namely in terms of blocked professional growth paths. They occur especially among still relatively young employees who already have a considerable employment history (four to seven years) at their current workplace.

This set of different case and employee related characteristics influences the way employees make sense of their work experiences. The degree of conflict (or of thematic and motivational relevance) that specific aspects of the labour relation attain in employees' eyes, depends on

their meaning constructions. In other words, the degree of experienced conflicts, of attributed thematic or motivational relevance, results from the selection of specific parts of employees' cognitive repertoire as relevant for the interpretation of daily work experiences. Employees might use meaning constructions, which either underline or mediate the conflictive character of labour requirements and their own interests, of work processes, and conditions.<sup>209</sup> That is, employees' conflict perceptions are the result of cognitive coping practices.<sup>210</sup> Consequently, the next chapter asks for which elements of employees' cognitive repertoire, their knowledge, and their world-views contribute to the perception of daily work experiences as more or less conflictive and gain interpretive relevance for what kind of mental and/or practical coping practices and conflict solutions. This enables a better understanding of differences in conflict experiences and especially the way and degree in which employees develop action potential in the face of the experienced conflicts.

Finally, it should be underlined that neither the here detected requirements of flexibility and self-regulation, nor the resulting conflicts within current labour processes constitute completely new, exclusively Post-Fordist phenomena and developments. Instead, they represent reframed articulations of continuous structural conflicts and contradictions inherent in capitalist wage labour, namely conflicts about the degree of labour requirements and exploitation, and between self-determination and control, which are at the basis of the transformation problem. Both, the 'old' and the 'new', more specifically Post-Fordist articulations of these processes are addressed in more detail in the analysis of coping practices, in the conclusion of the next chapter.

---

<sup>209</sup> In Schütz' model, the attribution of motivational, thematic, and interpretational relevance always aims at and results in the explanation and coherent definition of experienced situations and problems.

<sup>210</sup> The different forms of thematic and motivational relevance described so far are first and foremost derived from the opinions employees' express about their work. In a first instance they regard mental activities (the choice of cognitive patterns), and not (yet) the practical agency possibly resulting from these processes of thinking and interpretation.

## 8. Individual coping practices

Thus far, the different fields of conflict resulting from employees' daily work experiences have been presented. On this basis, this chapter engages in a detailed analysis of employees' coping practices, and thus the way employees give meaning to and react to the experienced conflicts.<sup>211</sup>

As pointed out in the theory chapter, constructions of meaning are conceptualised here as socially grounded subjective reasons for agency. Employees' common sense is of interest here not only in its function as subjective, individual cognitive coping practice producing an individual's action potential, but also in terms of its collective, socially generalisable features. Interview quotes, therefore, do not stand for individual experiences only, but are chosen to reflect typical, repeated coping practices. They often focus on longer passages from the same interviews to render visible argumentation strategies and patterns of reasoning as they develop throughout an interview.

The last chapter showed how employees experience and express discontent with their current work conditions. However, stories about open individual or collective workplace struggles, in the sense of direct confrontations with superiors and explicit protests against disliked labour requirements, only rarely emerged from the interviews. Such scarce conflict attitudes and apparently limited action potential might not appear as surprising given employees' overall experiences of precarisation and lacking opportunities for participation. At same time, it was described above how these experiences of precarisation and fake participation offers constitute a sharp contrast to employees' own aspirations in their work and employment conditions and negate realising important aspects of their intrinsic interests. Therefore, what in psychology theory is named the 'psychological contract' between employees and a company could be expected to get violated.<sup>212</sup> According to this theory, such a violation is supposed to provoke diverse forms of distancing from the work. In consequence, internal withdrawal from work could be anticipated as an alternative to open revolt in the cases under study here.

---

<sup>211</sup> Already the simple presentation of conflict fields as seen from employees' perspective, entails processes of meaning construction effectuated by employees in their storytelling during the interviews. While these have been so far taken as a given, this chapter precisely analyses these processes of meaning construction as part of employees' coping practices and as preconditions for the development of their agency.

<sup>212</sup> In labour psychology, a 'psychological contract' is conceptualised as employees' expectations in the mutual behaviour and the relationship between their employers and themselves. Particularly, such a mental, imaginary contract includes the rights and duties this relationship entails (Anderson/Schalk 1998; Rousseau 2000; Rousseau/Tijoriwala 1998).

Studying employees' coping practices reveals where and how workplace consent is openly or internally disrupted, and what kind of open or hidden resistance attitudes occur. Yet, it also shows how and why workforce alignment is maintained despite experiences of conflict and violated aspirations. The idea of a 'fair exchange' of mutual rights and duties, which is entailed also in the concept of a 'psychological contract', plays an important role in this (re-)production of consent. Analysis concludes by underlining employees' active role for both the maintenance and the disruption of workplace consent, and thus, the functioning and/or the limits of labour control.

Employees' coping practices are presented here grouped according to different forms of coping, indicating different attitudes towards experienced conflicts as well as different degrees of action potential. These patterns of coping are 'adaptation', 'appropriation of meaning', (mental and practical) 'border drawing', and 'conflictive negotiation'. Adaptation to given work conditions and labour requirements covers practices of rule internalisation, separation, and distinction, as well as transferring conflicts and reducing conflict relevance. Practices of appropriating meaning particularly concern the reinterpretation of work performance as a sign of personal competence and values. Conflictive negotiation, in turn, refers to attempts of practically appropriating and negotiating better work conditions in direct discussions with superiors. Border drawing, finally, regards the rejection of management's control strategies and concrete labour requirements. It might constitute a mental strategy of withdrawal and distancing from work, or produce practical forms of daily personal strikes. Practices of adaptation tend to allow only limited action potential, enabling employees to deal with the given framework, to enact and to endure the respective labour requirements. Mental and practical appropriations and border drawing, in turn, might produce enlarged possibilities for acting, in the sense that they might entail a questioning of labour requirements and a struggle to change given conditions. However, as is argued and demonstrated throughout this chapter, there is no clear-cut division line between these analytically distinguished forms. Instead of any dualism between control and resistance, seemingly opposed coping practices support each other and different forms of coping merge. That is why, the goal is not to construct a typology of distinct, coherent employee types, but rather to distinguish different coping patterns. Individual employees' actual practices might and will vary across the distinguished forms of coping, according to their specific positioning within every concrete conflict situation. The intent of constructing the analysis in this way is precisely to make the ambiguous character of employees' coping practices visible, without reducing them to either

subordinate tactics or autonomous resistance practices. As confrontations with the social world aimed at acquiring necessary capacities to act within this world, coping practices always constitute both a means of appropriating and challenging this reality, and of balancing and sustaining its contradictory, conflicting aspects.

After presenting each of these coping patterns, the analysis turns to employee characteristics and the distribution of coping patterns across employee groups in the different firms. For this purpose, differentiations developed in the previous chapter on conflict experiences are taken up. The analysis, thus, reveals the central role of two different understandings of the labour relation present within employees' common sense, which influence their conflict perceptions, as well as their capacities to develop more or less limited, adapting or enlarged, confrontational action potential: a moral, justice-based understanding of the employment relation as a fair exchange of mutual rights and duties, and a more antagonistic concept of a confrontational exchange, based on a struggle between conflicting interests. Whereas the collective symbol of a fair exchange is relevant within all coping patterns, it is the confrontational concept of the labour relation that sets the grounds for practices of border drawing and appropriation, in terms of rejecting and negotiating existing work conditions.

## ***8.1 Adaptation***

This section deals with the first set of coping practices subsumed under the title of 'adaptation'. Explicit individual availability demonstrations, as well as the acceptance and internalisation of given labour requirements and rules, are part of these practices. Such internalisation comprises a strong belief in the logic of merit. It is fostered by a common sense concept of the labour relation as a fair exchange of mutual rights and duties. This relies on strong moral justice expectations as well as employees' consciousness of their own good work performance generating claims for recognition, a voice, and participation. In other words, adaptation also entails a demanding aspect. It is based on various forms of appropriating meaning, especially in the form of personalisation. These are discussed in more detail in an own section below (8.2.1).

Adaptation rests on and produces two different practices of differentiation: a separation between micro and macro levels of conflict (settlement); and a distinction from both 'too lazy' and 'too ambitious' colleagues. Various practices can be distinguished by which experienced conflicts are smoothened and taken the edge off. An important such practice is



the transfer of conflicts to other actors. This is again achieved through a personalisation of conflict reasons, and often in close connection with strategies of distinction. Moreover, the importance of experienced problems is reduced by means of an externalisation or a transfer into the future, by normalisation and naturalisation, and by comparison and counterbalancing with worse situations and aspects.

### 8.1.1 Rule internalisation, good work, and fair exchange

Starting out with an analysis of employees' practices of rule internalisation, the first quote is an example of how employees voice their own availability strategies. Here is a passage from an interview in firm G, undertaken with a 27-years old ex-temporary, permanent part-time sales clerk who has already worked in that shop for four years:

*Int: I forgot to ask you something earlier: Your normal work times, without the overtime hours, are they fixed? Do you always work in the morning?*

*Daniele: No. I work in the fresh vegetable and fruits department. There I do two different shifts, one week in the morning and one in the afternoon. Right now, two of my colleagues are on holidays for a month and a half. Well, we are really short of personnel during this month and a half. So, that's why I do the morning shift for a whole month now. And I don't tell them that normally I should do two different shifts, according to my contract I mean. No, I don't go complaining like that. I do the morning shifts because they need someone in the morning (Daniele/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm G).<sup>213</sup>*

The interviewee here presents the situation of staff shortage as a collective problem of those working in the department ('we'). In other words, he expresses responsibility for the department's performance. A few sentences later, he defines flexibility requirements created by staff shortage as a management issue. This management issue is accepted as a given, unquestioned, objective condition. It is not explained in terms of management strategies of cost reduction and latent understaffing. At the same time, by acknowledging this management need, the interviewee highlights his own availability in the face of management's requests. An availability that seems to gain value as it goes beyond the duties fixed in the employment contract. Underlining this extra-contractual character, doing the morning shift each day appears as a voluntary act that requires recognition.

Later on in the interview, it becomes clear how such a consciousness of one's own given availability and good work performance reduces the degree of perceived vulnerability and

---

<sup>213</sup> All interviews in this study were conducted in Italian. All quoted interview passages provided in this chapter have been translated from Italian into English by the author.

insecurity:

*Int: And now, do you feel safe in your job? Or do you have any fear of losing it?*

*Daniele: No, no fear. If I do my work and that's it, then I am safe in my job. You have to be calm and peaceful with the customers. When you come to the workplace, you have to forget about your family problems. (...) I know that it's not easy, but you have to forget your family problems when you start working, because you have to concentrate on the job. You mustn't think of two things at the same time.*

*Int: Do you manage to do this?*

*Daniele: Yes, I do. I have a lot of problems, but when I go to work I try to concentrate on my work. At least during the hours of work. But, when your work is finished, you should not think about it anymore, you should think of your life then. That's what makes you secure in keeping your job: to do the work well, not to make any mistakes just because you think about your family problems (Daniele/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm G).*

Again, the interviewee accepts given labour requirements as an unquestioned, not criticised necessity, even though they might entail hard emotional labour: In this case, the requirement to treat customers in a calm way and to forget about personal problems that might interfere with such an emotionally controlled behaviour. At the same time, he appropriates this requirement as his own capacity to handle a difficult task. This results in a marked consciousness of one's own good work performance, which the interviewee uses to legitimise his claim for a secure job position. In this way, he produces in himself a feeling of employment security and reduces the weight of experienced insecurities linked to his part-time employment status – namely the insecurity of monthly incomes and professional growth. A similar line of argument is present in the following quote, regarding a 20-year-old now permanent part-time cashier with three years of employment history in shop C1.

*Chiara: I'm married, I live with my husband. I have a credit to pay for our flat. Part-time wage is a real problem. You absolutely need to be in two to live from this little money. (...) Yes, you need to do a lot of overtime hours then. (...) It's not always easy to get them. It's them (the superiors) who ask you. It depends on their needs. (...) And there also is a lot of competition among colleagues for these overtime hours. Just like: Why do you get that hour and I don't? But, unfortunately, it's them who decide. It's not that we could... They decide according to what's needed. They ask those who are most ready to accept, who are most available. If someone isn't available to their requests, they do not even look at that person. (...) No, no, I don't feel forced to accept. I say yes, when I can do it; when I can't, patience. Anyway, they know that I'm a very available person. If I say no it's not because I just don't want to do it, but because I really have something else to do. In fact, me, they always ask me. Only very rarely I say no. But*

*sometimes it happens; everybody also has a private life (Chiara/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C1).*

The interviewee here first presents a problem – her low part-time wage. Then, the given uncertain conditions to attenuate this problem – by relying on inconsistent overtime – are defined as depending on given, unquestioned company needs. Finally, her own constrained situation – as being dependent on additional income from overtime hours – gets redefined as her own capacity of being an available employee. This consciousness of one's own 'correct' work attitude enables framing the decision to accept or not to accept overtime requests as a free choice, leaving space for one's own private interests. The contradiction between claiming to be able to decide autonomously on when to do overtime and the need to maintain an image of being an available employee, which requires constant availability demonstrations, remains un-named. Also the impossibility of professional growth and an increase of part-time hours as an alternative to the dependence on overtime hours is not raised as an issue.

The point here is not to say that the interviewee would be in any way 'misinterpreting' her own interests or giving a wrong account of her own action potential. Instead, what is discerned here is the argumentative patterns she uses to produce her action potential: Demonstrating individual availability might be an effective way to acquire a relative secure informal workplace position from which blackmailing pressures are reduced and certain autonomy over flexibility decisions might be achieved. But, these reduced pressures and relative autonomy gains remain subject to rule compliance within a given framework and to an internalisation of respective labour requirements. Limited action potential is gained precisely by negating or rendering invisible this constraint and their own limitations to it.

For another now a permanent full-time cashier (aged 28 with four years of employment history in firm D), being convinced of her 'correct' work performance even allows for a dismissal of preoccupations and insecurity during her initial phase of temporary employment. Interestingly, in this case, claims for her own good work are combined with underlining her own conflict capacities. In fact, such claims can also be used as a basis for rejecting labour requirements, for border drawing, and/or conflictive negotiation.

*Alice: Thanks to my former work experience in large scale retailing, I was hired when the shop first opened. First, I was on a 24-month training contract. Only afterwards, I got a permanent contract. But, I've always been really calm, having no fear because of the initial temporary contract. You know, I know how to do a good job. I do what I'm asked to do. Sometimes I also talk back about what they tell me to do. I can be quite a bone-head (Alice/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm D).*

Considering again the first quoted part-time employee from firm G, there is a more openly contradictory presentation of the personal action potential, with a less complete dismissal of blackmailing pressures. The problem he is talking about here are limited part-time hours, management's refusal to augment these, and the resulting need to do and obtain insecure overtime hours by means of encompassing availability demonstrations.

*Int: Is it easy to say no when you are asked spontaneously to do overtime?*

*Daniele: It's not that it is easy. It's as I said before: If you are sure about your job. If I say yes, it's because I am cooperative with them. In the moments they needed me, I've been present. So, they won't contest me; I think they will keep me. (...) Well, yes, it's true you can't say no too often. Once, maybe twice. But, if you say always no, well then you will only do your regular hours and that's it. Even if they need some overtime to be done, they won't ask you anymore. (...) Sometimes I just arrive at home and they call me, they ask if I could come back in the afternoon. If there is nothing else I have to do that day, I come back to work. For my flat, I have to pay 740€ each month for the mortgage. If I only do my regular hours, I only pay the credit, but I don't eat. I have to be available. (...) A secure job, in fact, would mean to have a full-time job, and a permanent contract. But, if you are part-time... . At the end of the month I need to have earned that money, I have to pay for the flat. That's why inside myself I feel obliged. But, if I have something important to do, I can't. If I have something else to do, I say no (Daniele/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm G).*

This last sentence is a condensed example of the inconsistency present in employees' meaning constructions, or showing their bizarrely composed common sense. Apparently, obligation and one's own decision power or capacities to reject management's requirements can coexist without provoking open contradictions. Obviously, this latent contradiction reflects employees' everyday experiences, where limited rejection of labour requirements is possible in conjunction with experienced blackmail pressure thanks to previously and extensively demonstrating one's availability. Yet, these acquired limited capacities to act remain fragile and, above all, a mental construction: They are not enough to achieve any substantial alteration of the precarious part-time position, as actual work time flexibility requirements impedes taking up a second job, for example. This supports the thesis from chapter seven, which suggests that most important for the maintenance of employees' action potential seems to be the perception of reduced vulnerability and relative autonomy. Here, it can be seen how this perception is produced by these meaning constructions and especially by creating a self-image of high availability and good work performance. Such a positive self-

image enables employees to endure difficult work and living conditions.<sup>214</sup>

As the following passage demonstrates even more clearly, the interviewee feels pressure and conflicted about availability requests and the resulting workload:

*Int: And beyond the union assemblies, among colleagues, do you talk about these conflicts? Or is it all only individual problems?*

*Daniele: Yes, among us, sure. I feel that... for example my colleague feels that in her department there is not enough staff, that there are not enough people at the cash desks. Or me, in the vegetable and fruit department, there are people missing and management makes me do so much work during my normal work hours, they stress me without giving any overtime. Well, then I go talk with the shop stewards: 'Sorry, this and that doesn't work out' (Daniele/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm G).*

Interestingly, these issues are voiced explicitly as conflicts and as occasions of protest and rejection of labour requirements only in the last interview sequence when talking about collective agency and interest representation, but not during the whole first part of interview when presenting personal work experiences. Seemingly, as long as the interviewee speaks from an individual position - or, as long as daily coping practices remain individual - conflicts are covered up by the described practices of adaptation and internalisation of individual availability requirements. Only when the perspective changes to a collective level, when being asked about participation in collective interest representation and the state of collective agency, and thus, some collective support appears within the horizon of thinking, some capacities emerge to clearly voice and face conflicts in a more offensive way.

On the individual level and closely linked to claims about one's own good work performance, employees repeatedly refer to the collective symbol of a 'fair exchange' to motivate their work aspirations and attitudes.

*Int: Do you feel somehow responsible for the well-being of the firm?*

*Daniele: Yes. In my opinion there are two types of people. There are those who get up in the morning, go to work, and are interested only in finishing their work hours to go back home. And there are those others who get up in the morning, and when they present themselves at work, they feel responsible for their work, for doing it in the right way. Because, at the end of the month, they give you your wage; it's not that you never receive anything. (...) Me, I'm definitely the second type. I don't know, but I feel that there are other types, but... . (...) Listen, if you would own the company, would it be ok for you if your*

---

<sup>214</sup> As stated in chapter seven, particularly firm I's young employees believe in management's promises of participation and growth, and the self-esteem they have of their own labour performance is based on that.

*employee would do it like that, if he isn't interested in the work? (...) Well, I think like this: a firm that gives an employee a wage at the end of the month, why shouldn't this employee give something, too? Because it's not that he has no interest in the work. He has to give, has to give, how do you say, I feel that, to receive, you have to give. You can't just take, take, take; no, you have to give (Daniele/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm G).*

As can be seen from this quote, employees' cognitive coping practices rely on a strong moral justice concept. The labour relation is conceived of as a fair exchange of mutual rights and duties, basically wage and acceptable work conditions for due and responsible labour performance. Moreover, as could be seen above from employees' experiences of precarisation, such a 'fair exchange' would comprise their recognition as both responsible company actors and full persons with family needs and other life interests. This exchange is supposed to be 'fair' in the sense that it is conceived of as a win-win situation based on an equal interest in and mutual recognition of good performance provided and a decent pay-off received in return.<sup>215</sup>

This insistence on moral values is combined with a personalisation of given availability and effectuated labour performance: The latter figures not only as question of one's own capacity (as argued so far with regard to employees' claims for their own 'good' work), but also as a question of one's personal character. In this example, the practice of personalisation can be found in the definition of two different personality types with their individual work attitudes.<sup>216</sup>

Meanwhile, power relations and interest differences become invisible: The interviewee does not at all perceive the experienced tensions of precarisation and forced availability as being a result of the exploitative character of capitalist wage labour, its profit maximising imperative, its structural conflicts, and its unequal power positions. Instead, these structural features and conflicts disappear behind the universalist moral justice concept of a 'fair exchange'. Consequently, employees voice the experienced tensions and problems in terms of 'disrespecting' a moral standard that is taken as a given and 'true' rule of the game. But, they do not discern them as interest conflicts concerning the terms and conditions of the use and transformation of their labour power. In fact, these moral justice expectations, the focus on respect and fairness, and the resulting dismissal of interest conflicts foster the above described

---

<sup>215</sup> To give one example regarding current flexibilisation, such concepts of 'give and take' are also described by Hall's and Atkin's (2006) study on employee' perceptions of work time flexibility and its effect on work attitudes and commitment.

<sup>216</sup> I will return to this specific argumentative pattern later when presenting practices of transferring conflicts and appropriating meaning.

reductive perception of conflicts only in terms of participation, recognition, and normative control, excluding, neutralising or relativising the experience of conflictive labour requirements.

The main limit of action potential here results from the fact that, based on this understanding of labour relations, employees face experienced conflicts first and foremost from within the existing frame of labour requirements. They do not question the legitimacy of given requirements, rules, and work conditions. But, they call for respecting these very same rules: namely an increased recognition of their own performance in terms of a 'just' pay-off of fulfilled requirements, as well as a greater space for self-responsible management of these requirements. While the interviewees disguise the fake character of management's rhetoric of merit and participation, they still want it to become true and refer to it as a valid acting frame. Consequently, their own aspirations in participation remain confined to a more active involvement and taking part in management's indirect control strategies, or a more participatory integration into the firm. As an effect, claims for participation turn into a call for better, more effective conditions for self-regulation in the fulfilment of management induced requirements, rather than for any substantial self-determination. The point here is not to disqualify employees' desires for participation and recognition, but to demonstrate how the specific articulation of these interests, within the concept of fair exchange, produces limits for their capacities to face workplace conflicts in an encompassing and pro-active way that might produce change.

The following passage gives an example of when an employee feels disrespected. It refers to a permanent part-time cashier in firm G (aged 27, five years in the shop).

*Mario: I've stayed there, until 5 or 6 p.m., from 7 a.m. in the morning, maybe even for one or two weeks continuously, sometimes even without taking time for a lunch break. But that was because I did a work I somehow liked [in the frozen food department] (...) When they put me as a cashier, I told them immediately that this is work I don't like (...) I've also tried to talk with the manager, but (...) With the former manager I've always, always been responsive to their requests (...) But with what results? That I ended up at the checkout counter anyway" (Mario/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

As this quote shows, such experiences of disrespect might make employees feel angry and frustrated. Yet, these feelings do not give them many resources for acting. What they experience is strong injustice. But, without naming its reasons, they cannot even try to act against it – other than through personal withdrawal (as will be shown later on). They remain blocked on the level of moral indignation.

At the same time, such moral indignation also serves as an effective coping practice through the appropriation of meaning. By claiming that a fair exchange is a valid moral standard, even in the face of experiences contradicting this, employees' manage to present themselves with moral integrity, and thus, superior to management's incorrect, morally condemnable practices. This allows them to maintain self-esteem and a sense of their own control despite destabilising, frustrating experiences of precarisation. The fault for being blocked in dissatisfying labour positions is not theirs, but of the unfair world around them. In one of the group interviews, employees even seem to enter into competition with each other for presenting themselves as the biggest victim of the greatest injustice. This self-presentation seems to have been used to underline the value of their work performances - while at the same time holding the claim for recognition and fairer treatment. Sticking with a concept of fair exchange sets the grounds for both internalising labour requirements, as well as for rejecting (full) responsibility for their own employment situation and labour conditions, and thus, at least potentially, also for a mental distancing from work and its requirements. The ambiguity lies in the fact that such mental distancing simultaneously allows for continuous workforce alignment, for integration, endurance, and adaptation to given labour requirements and work conditions. Employees' justice concepts provoke contradictions and breaks in everyday experiences - as exemplified in the experiences of disrespect. But, simultaneously They function to cement workplace consent by maintaining the illusion of unitary workplace interests.<sup>217</sup>

This idea of a fair exchange of mutual rights and duties obviously represents no new phenomenon, but rather a very traditional work ethic also valid in the old Fordist context with its paternalistic notions of dependent employment. However, it can be equally articulated according to the neoliberal call for self-responsibility and 'performance justice' or merit. Or, neoliberal positions are appealing to employees, because these speak to their desire for recognition of given work performance and 'merit'. In the interviews, the collective symbol of a fair exchange was most often combined with a strong adherence to the logic of individual merit as a basis for acquiring rights and entitlements to a (presumed) 'fair' wage. In part due to this adherence, employees can criticise the individualising, competition, and mistrust

---

<sup>217</sup> This is not to say that employees would have no interest at all in the well-being of the firm they are employed in. Yet, this existential interest in maintaining their work place and their income prospects does not exclude other structural interest conflicts regarding labour conditions and exploitation. In contrast, the latter result from the same structural conditions of capitalist wage work, which oblige workers to sell their labour power on the market, make them dependent on the firm's economic well-being in the first place – without this well-being translating itself in any equal, necessary way in an amelioration of work conditions and pay, or even the elimination of workers' subordinate position in the employment relation.



producing effects of informal flexibility regulations – as seen in the conflict chapter (see section 7.2.4) - without reflecting on the logic of merit itself as one of the origins of this individualisation. In addition, the internalisation of individual availability requirements and rule compliance also functions as a form of self-responsibilisation. However, less than as an internalisation of responsibility for the firm's results and a respective Post-Fordist self-perception as an 'entremployee', employees express their readiness to rule compliance as part of their workers' duties and responsibilities, and their interests as dependent employees. This is a clear expression of the continuous shaping power of the traditional side of work ethic. Moreover, reluctance towards strictly firm-interested 'entremployee' identities – despite a strongly present desire and sense of responsibility – might result from employees' experience of participatory management strategies as fake. The belief in a fair exchange functions strengthens and legitimates the logic of merit and vice versa: The exchange is seen as fair if it respects acquired merits.

Under the given circumstances, adherence to the logic of merit, inevitably, fosters the individualisation of acting perspectives, as these are focussed on individual availability demonstrations. In an ambiguous way, the traditional work ethic of a 'fair exchange,' at least implicitly, refers to not only duties, but also to employees' rights, collective standards, and legitimate limits of individual labour performance. These can become a basis for coping practices of effective, and not only mental, border drawing.

The following quote is another example of an employee connecting the concepts of fair exchange and merit, and considers the ambiguity of the meaning of rights and duties. It is taken from another interview in firm G, with a 27-year-old now permanent, full-time cashier who has been working for seven years already in that shop.

*Eric: They told me that, if I wanted to have more hours and a higher qualification level, the only department where there was some space was the fish counter. I really didn't like that kind of work. But, if I wanted to grow, if I wanted to have some increase in hours and wage levels, I had to take this step, even if I didn't like it. I did this for 4 years, then somebody went into pre-pension and I got my 38 hours.*

*Mario: And you didn't show how much it was a heavy thing for you?*

*Eric: Hey, no, I didn't show that it was a heavy thing because you have to reach some goal. If you want to reach a goal... (Mario/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm G; Eric/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

What follows is a long description of how the interviewee's hopes in professional growth have been disappointed. This concerns an aspired increase in qualification and wage level, associated with the specialist's work at the fish counter. Disappointment is followed by his return to the cash desk, his original work place. The interviewee angrily concludes his narration about this frustrating experience of not receiving the (legally owed) payoff for his own engagement as mobbing.

The need to demonstrate availability in order to increase any chances for professional growth reflects actual everyday experiences. The interesting thing is that, despite his negative experience, the same employee still appears to stick to the logic of merit as the justification for his own acting and assessment frame:

*Eric: When I started working at the fish counter I did it because they told me that I would have my hours increased. But not everybody does like this. I see certain guys and not all are interested in having more hours. They just want a calm trouble-free job. But this can't work out; because at work, if you are ready to give, I don't say that you'll always receive what you want, but you will have more possibilities. But if you always refuse everything, if you always close the door to any requests, forget about any favour from the company. Not favours, actually; things you deserve (Eric/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

This quote clearly speaks of the moral charge the logic of merit is associated with: wanting to have a calm, trouble-free job appears as a negative, ineffective, and criticisable attitude. But, the same moral charge fosters Eric's own claims for the expected payoff in exchange for submitting to availability demonstration – as something rightfully earned, not as a present. It enhances consciousness of one's own rights – though no unreserved rights, but conditional, acquired on merit.

For those with less conflictive experiences, or a higher resistance level to frustration regarding precarisation, in general, and professional growth, in particular, the concepts of fair exchange and merit are accompanied not only with the above described desire for non-authoritarian, participatory workplace relations. They often go hand in hand with a strong belief in the just and correct behaviour of superiors, as well as with a desire for close, informal, and confidential relationship with them.<sup>218</sup>

---

<sup>218</sup> In Ezzy's words, such loyalty and belief in companies' reciprocity, despite contrary everyday experiences, reflects a "simulacrum of trust" produced by management's indirect control strategies (Ezzy 2001: 635ff). The main gratification for hard work and dedication on this backdrop is emotional satisfaction, but only by participation in a pseudo family, and instead of any employment stabilisation or professional growth. Yet, our

*Chiara: Most superiors I call them by their first name. The majority do so. We address everybody in an informal way (using the informal 'tu' instead of the formal 'lei'). That's why we have a good relationship, so to speak, a confidential one. We don't call them in a formal way ('lei'). There is a bit of a friendship, because of the informal ways. (...) In case of problems, we go talk to them without any problems. And if they can, they also meet you halfway. Well, then it depends also a bit on who is available to their requests, they tend to choose a bit on this basis (Chiara/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C1).*

*Int: Is it possible to criticise your superiors?*

*Marco: Yes, sure. My department head is someone like me, he's just the same. (...) Before, I always had to greet the director in a formal way when he passed by. Today's director, instead, he is dressed just like we are, it's an idiot just like me. We are all equal, all equal. (...) When there is a lot of confusion on Saturdays, he comes to the reception desk, he comes to work with us, doing the packages (...) They (management) try to make the higher levels in the hierarchy disappear... also because they want to pay less (laughing). (...) Everybody takes less here. The managers can't negotiate their pay; instead they have their career possibilities, to advance a step in the hierarchy. They try to exploit you this way. To get the most profit possible out of us. And to keep us all united, like a big family (Marco/permanent full-time contract, stock operator, firm D).*

The perception of direct superiors as an equal, available, and well-disposed counterpart appears here as an important element of workplace consent. This illusion functions even when the levelling of hierarchies is disguised as a purposeful management strategy. It is based to a large extent on the informal character of everyday interactions. What is especially revealing here is Chiara's declaration that confidential issues and complaints are worked out with equal interest partners and that compromises would be simply produced by the informal way of addressing each other with first names instead of the formal 'Lei'. Economic decentralisation at the department level further contributes to this consent producing effect within the employees' thinking. It results in increased economic pressures exercised on direct superiors and a relative precarisation being felt in their positions as well. Internalisation of shared company responsibility is supported by the concept of a common worker's role and position reaching across actual hierarchies. Workplace consent is sustained by employees' belief in a team rhetoric, their aspirations for a fair exchange, and their adherence to a traditional work ethic and workers' role. As the example of Marco shows - a permanent full-time stock operator aged 40 and working for two years at firm D - two different interpretations of the

---

analysis highlights the fact that such belief and loyalty is not only a result of management's normative control and team rhetoric alone. Instead, they are actively produced by employees' cognitive coping practices, and especially their moral concepts of fair exchange held up against contrary, frustrating work realities.

labour relation as being either characterised by exploitation or an exchange of merited rights and duties are apparently compatible. After pointing to the issue of exploitation in the last quote, in several further parts of the interview he insists strongly on his good work performance, his self-responsible management of work tasks, and his acquired professional experience as a warehouse worker.

*Int: Do you feel responsible for the work you do then?*

*Marco: Me, I am happy that there is nobody who tells me anything, what to do. (...) They try to make everybody act in a self-responsible way. And this works, I have to admit that it works. (...) We all have accumulated so much experience that we are really autonomous workers. Management counts a lot on this, on our competences and autonomy (Marco/permanent full-time contract, stock operator, firm D).*

However, employees' belief in justice, their interest in friendly shop floor relations and equality, does not imply that there are no conflicts between employees, direct superiors, and/or the firm management.

*Marco: This informal atmosphere pushes you even to talk badly with your superiors.*

*Alice: Oh, yes, sometimes even in quite unfriendly ways.*

*Marco: In any other firm it would be impossible to just go and talk to your superiors. Here, the relationship is really different. You even can have a disagreement and a real confrontation. (...) Anyway, the point in all this is not to solve the problems. You talk about them. Talking about problems makes you already feel as if they would be nearly solved. For you it's as if... (...) Yeah, you can let off some steam. That's it.*

*Alice: But that's already so much. It's important.*

*Union officer: But it's not always enough, because if the problem is a real one...*

*Alice: Yes, ok, then, if things don't change, you really feel mucked about*

*(Marco/permanent full-time contract, stock operator, firm D; Alice/ permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm D).*

Informal relations with superiors at least in firm D do not only function as a way to cover up conflicts and to harmonise workplace relations, but also as a safety valve that allows some conflicts to come up and be expressed before the issue blows up. Though, this produces a risk of ulterior frustration in the case of unsolved problems, opportunities for having an individual voice seem to maintain their appeal despite frequent disappointments. This is mentioned by the same employees with concrete examples in other parts of the interview as can be seen in the following section on practices of separation. Finally, this management strategy further

pushes the individualisation of labour relations as well as the personalisation of conflicts - as this way of openly carrying out conflicts is also an individual strategy based on personal relationships with superiors.

### 8.1.2 Practices of separation and distinction

Separation is a further cognitive coping practice that is important for maintaining faith in voice opportunities and for whether conflicts emerge or not. An example of this cognitive pattern can be seen in the following passage.

*Alice: In the shop we don't have anything like that internal union in the warehouse, no real union either. Problems are resolved by talking with the superiors and then eventually with the director. But, you can tell them as often as you want that it's cold at the cash desks, it still remains cold: The building is the way it is, they won't reconstruct it for you. You simply have to put on more warm clothes; they might give you a pullover or gloves.(...)They listen, yes, they always find the time to listen to you, they never tell you no, or if it's really impossible to talk at that moment, he calls you back later. They don't forget these things. (...) They always try to meet us halfway, this is for sure. (...) To create this positive work atmosphere, there is always an attempt to find a solution (Alice/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm D).*

The employee here is really frustrated about the ineffectiveness of individual complains regarding the overall work conditions. At the same time, she keeps a positive attitude towards voice opportunities regarding daily problems and the direct interaction with superiors. This ambiguous evaluation is possible, because a separation is made between different kinds of experienced conflicts: everyday micro-level problems regarding the immediate work process on the one hand, and more macro-level conflicts regarding overall work and employment conditions, on the other. The former are experienced as effectively regulated through informal interaction with direct superiors, based on the above described belief in personal confidential relations. These relations might also be conflictive from time to time. But, they are still interpreted as respectful personal relations with common interests in a smooth labour process seeking consensual conflict solutions with effective voice policies - again, even if management's interest in fostering integration and commitment through these is realised. If experienced problems persist on this level, they are explained by personal deficits and characteristics. It is interesting here that the most relevant conflicts named by the interviewee in this quote and also across the whole interview are disagreements and confrontations between colleagues. Superiors' interventions in such disputes are not seen as illegitimate

interference, but as valuable contributions to conflict solutions: There seems to be more confidence in superiors' impartiality than in relations among colleagues. Macro-level problems, in turn, might be characterised by clear interest differences. But, they appear as out of reach for individual agency and informal interaction with direct superiors. Instead, they are presented as nearly naturally given facts ('the building is as it is').

Such functioning of micro-level negotiations as an effective coping practice and problem solution for certain topics reflects actual everyday experiences. In fact, employees highly value the even limited margins for effective participation and voice they are granted and/or manage to appropriate.

*Daniele: We decide together how to distribute the work of the day with the colleagues in my department. (...) also when there is something that doesn't run well. It's not that our department head would simply give an order. No, we talk among each other, how to better organise the department, the shifts, who can come back to work in the afternoon, or if the vegetables have to be arranged more beautifully, or whatever. That's how it works, we have to talk together. (...) This is really important to me, also the relationship with your department head and with your colleagues, too (Daniele/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm G).*

Besides a collective management of daily work tasks on the shop floor, employees appreciate being informed about company strategies, developments, and changes in staff assemblies and, in these instances, to be asked how to improve labour processes and performance, even if such participation does not affect actual decision processes on any changes or applications of employee proposals. The maintained unilateral decision power of management are accepted as a given and necessary fact (as justified by management's greater responsibility). Again, even only limited management offers of participation can gain such appeal not least as they ventilate aspirations in a firm collective and an illusion of common interests as well as an opportunity for compromise. It is through this valuation that even only narrow opportunities for participation can continue to function as a reference frame for one's own aspirations - and that management's continuous unilateral decision power remains unquestioned. In this, as can be seen from the example of Alice (firm D), the fact that other conflictive issues remain unresolved does not imply any systematic criticism of management's voice strategies. In fact, in the above quoted passage regarding conflictive interactions with superiors (8.1.1, p. 291), frustration with lacking actual changes is voiced only after it has been introduced first by the union officer. Whereas before, opportunities for only a rhetoric voice are simply valued as being 'already so much'. Thus, this interviewee's consent to these strategies appears to be

organised around experience of perceived 'caring' and her perceived 'own control'. 'Caring' refers to the attention demonstrated by management to employees' daily, personal(ised) problems. Important seems to be here a request for recognition, which is already satisfied by having a minimum possibility to voice one's own concerns. The question of actual decision powers to realise voiced interests, instead, appears to be of secondary relevance for this consent - at least beyond the level of verbal criticisms, regarding actual, daily agency and rule compliance.

For Marco, instead, as indicated above, satisfaction with these internal structures of conflict settlement goes hand in hand with their recognition as being purposeful, integrative, and profit maximising management strategies. This interviewee expresses a clearer criticism of the limited scope of covered problems. Yet, satisfaction and criticisms remain separated, as they are applied to different interest spheres and addressed in different moments of the interview. His colleague, in turn, can even talk about both effectiveness and ineffectiveness of individual complains one right after the other, without voicing any contradictions between both experiences on her own. In fact, an important difference in the perception of micro and macro level problems might be that on the macro level, one's own agency is perceived only as a complaint about given conditions. Whereas on the micro-level of daily work organisation, more than as complaints, one's own interventions are experienced as negotiation processes, based on one's own competencies and personal involvement. On the macro-level, instead, responsibility for any changes is, if these are seen as possible at all, delegated in a rather passive way to institutions of collective interest representation, that is shop stewards and unions. Separation as a cognitive practice constitutes another form of appropriating meaning by defining one's own, though partial and only individual, active workplace role. It might reflect and/or sustain an actual acquisition of negotiation capacities regarding specific conflicts at the micro level. At the same time, separation curtails perceived possibilities of actively participating in collective agency. Instead, it sets the ground for enduring (other) dissatisfying aspects of work conditions.

Besides this separation between different interest and conflict spheres, a further differentiation is important for establishing and maintaining confidence in a fair exchange. Part and parcel of individual availability demonstrations and requests to be recognised for their own merits are employees attempts to distinguish themselves from others. First of all, this coping practice takes the form of a distinction from 'too lazy' colleagues.

This form of distinction has been expressed already in the above quotes from the two

interviewees in firm G (Daniele and Eric). T sales clerk Daniele distinguishes between two types of employees being interested in work or not, when the cashier Eric declares that not everybody would be willing to demonstrate the same availability as he did in order to obtain a better employment position. The first of the following passages reveals even more clearly the personalisation – that is the attribution of certain work attitudes and performances to personal character traits – which is implied in this kind of meaning construction. Such personalisation constitutes a transfer of conflicts on the individual employee and his/her personality.

*Daniele: I don't know, but this work is heavy only because you have your own personal problems to think of. But it's not the work as such that is heavy. It's you, that you don't want to work, maybe because of some problem. But, as I told you before, when you go to work, you have to leave your problems at home (Daniele/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm G).*

*Chiara: They always tell the same things in these courses: to always keep smiling, those things. (...) These things enter in one ear and go out the other, that's for sure. (...) I think it's a good thing that management tries to increase employee responsibility, to provide a good service, to be quick, attentive, and committed. At least in that way, they also remember those who are a bit lazy about this. Yes, it's correct that they say these things. Well, then there are those who don't listen. But I think it's a good thing (Chiara/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C1).*

*Cristina: There was an interim worker the other day who talked on the cell phone while working at the cash desk. (...) I called the department head and told her. But, when she arrived, the other one had already put the phone away. I swear, I never ever would permit myself to do anything like that! (Cristina/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C1)*

Making a distinction with 'too lazy' colleagues, especially in the second to last quote, produces consent to management's indirect control strategies of responsabilisation - even if some distance to such responsabilisation and its concrete forms is expressed. This consent is based on the above described consciousness of one's own good work performance, and the perception of belonging to the 'in-group' of available, responsible employees. Yet, in the last quote, the distinction might also speak of jealousy with those who manage to reject some workplace rules and to create more space for their own interests. This quote pertains to a colleague of Chiara, also a permanent part-time cashier in firm C1 (aged 38, one year in the shop). At the same time, the employee's argument here reflects and enacts the management's strategy of inclusion and exclusion with its focussed pressure on certain, less available employees.



As demonstrated above, this management tactic produces actual, daily experienced differentiations between more and less precarious, more or less integrated employee groups. In this situation, retreating on management's argument and reproducing it in one's own practices of distinction, serves as a tool to legitimise one's own better position as well as a simultaneous disinterest for others' problems – as this is encouraged by individualised labour relations, individual availability strategies, and merit based justice concepts. The following quote gives an example of the practical, individualising consequences of distinction processes. In fact, this interviewee shows herself quite ignorant of management's existing focussed control pressures in her shop (particularly regarding work times and breaks),<sup>219</sup> as these do not touch upon her, but only on other, less integrated and available colleagues. Consequently, her own previous experiences of struggling with temporary contracts are not transmitted to others. In addition, this passage offers a further example of rule internalisation (no breaks on Sundays). Distinction and rule internalisation, in fact, support each other and together sustain the individualist arrangement with an achieved position.

*Chiara: No, no, I don't feel controlled. (...) Well, personally, I don't experience such control. (...) Is this true, even at our firm that these things exist? (...) For taking a break, no, there are no problems. No, well, it depends, if there aren't so many customers. But they are really very flexible with me. If I ask, I can take a break to go smoke a cigarette without problems. Obviously, if you ask for it on a Sunday, they will kill you. (...) Honestly, since we have a permanent contract, all these things (instability of temporary contracts, blackmailing, etc), we take much less notice of them; because, well, we don't personally experience these problems in the first person anymore. (...) Well, no, the seasonal staff that is there today, we just don't know them. No, we don't talk with them about our experiences with the legal actions to get a permanent contract or other things (Chiara/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C1).*

In contrast to these practices of accusing other's supposedly negative work attitudes, a further strategy of distinction consists in distancing oneself from colleagues who are 'too ambitious':

*Alice: There was a colleague of mine, we started working together on a part-time contract. He did everything to obtain 38 hours. He became department head and then vice director. But from there, they sent him back to being a sales clerk again. We were all astonished when they sent him back. Well, apparently he didn't have the qualifications to do that job.*

---

<sup>219</sup> Shop steward: They control the times when you leave your work, the breaks, work hours, the moment in which cash registers are closed. Generally, these controls primarily affect those employees, which the firm considers 'negative' examples, those who aren't sufficiently available, who do their regular work time and then go home. Therefore, on some people there is more pressure, really high pressure, lots of control and so on. This is an objective reality (during the interview with Chiara/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C1).

*Marco: In only three years this guy, starting out as a simple employee, became vice director!*

*Alice: Well, yes, but he also was a great ass kisser, and he found a director who likes ass kissers, that's it. (...) I don't kiss anybody's ass... In fact, I'm always there, on the same position, you see*

*(Alice/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm D; Marco/permanent full-time contract, stock operator, firm D).*

This quote clearly expresses antipathy for colleagues who possess an attitude that is considered too servile and ambitious. It appears as dishonest behaviour, or even unfair competition. For it enabled a quick professional growth, which Alice herself is denied, despite her encompassing availability to management's flexibility requests, acquired competencies and fulfilment of informal additional work tasks. In fact, Alice takes high responsibilities in her department, taking over some of the department head's functions, such as establishing the work time schedules for all colleagues. Moreover, colleagues call her at home for advice if they have a problem during the work - which she readily gives. However, in this quote, frustration with her own blocked situation comes out against her colleagues. It is less explicitly voiced as a criticism of management's strategy of informal flexibility and its career promises that necessarily remain empty for a majority of employees. Denunciating too strong availability demonstrations as 'ass kissing' might function as a mechanism to establish limits for 'just' management requests and employee reactions. But, it is also a way to distinguish oneself from those who (at least temporarily) achieved professional growth. This again might reduce frustration and perceived self-responsibility for one's own non-advancement. In this, the distinction between due availability demonstrations and a 'fair' striving towards merits on the one hand, and 'ass kissing' on the other, is a question of maintaining personal dignity. Or, it becomes a matter of being able to endure continuous and fruitless availability demonstrations without losing some self-esteem. All the more as the latter is put under pressure from the complementary experience of lacking a distinction from newcomers, and that is from lacking official recognition of acquired competencies and labour performances. Interestingly, the final breakdown in the career of the mentioned colleague is presented only in terms of a personal deficit (lacking competencies). No pity or any criticism of the management's decision is voiced. Moreover, it is curious to see the interviewee lacking to see any chances to change her own situation by means of direct negotiations with her superiors – though, as presented before, she highly values this informal level of interaction as an opportunity for using her individual voice in other parts of the interview. Here, however, the impossibility of change is explained by given context conditions, which acquire the quality of natural, necessary facts: The qualification level fixed in her contract would simply not allow

for a formal recognition of her extra-tasks. Any possibility of open conflict on this issue is dismissed - such as engaging in a court trial to obtain a higher qualification level (as proposed by the union officer during the interview). Alice fears losing her job in case she shows any such confrontational attitude – despite her acquired, and at another time proudly underlined, relatively privileged workplace position and her stable full-time employment contract. On the one hand, this reveals the generalised force of precarisation processes. On the other, the declaration of fear in this case might also be used to legitimate her inactivity and conflict avoidance. Again, underlining the coercive strength of given conditions might be interpreted as a rejection of (management's and society's) self-responsibility requests (in this case especially in terms of labour market performance and 'entremployee' attitude requirements). But, it can be equally seen as a denial of one's own responsibility for acquiring action potential.

The following is another, very pronounced example of this need to distinguish oneself from availability demonstrations that are too extensive, especially as these pass a perceived moral limit of cheating on colleagues.

*Eric: Being available is one thing, dropping your trousers to abase yourself is another. I am available, but because I also have my interests. Doing certain things to scoop and win management's positive opinion, just like going there and saying that this and that guy would steal or do anything else: These things are not in my nature, ok. These things really don't have anything to do with the work. This isn't availability, this is doing the pimp. Doing the pimp doesn't bring you very far, neither in life nor at work. Sooner or later you will simply be beaten up. You cannot just cheat on others. But you have to be available, too. If they ask you to work on Sunday and you say always no. No, if you really need it, some other appointment for once you have to let go and come to work!*  
(Eric/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G)

The rejection of cheating on colleagues could suggest some concept and claim of workplace solidarity, but at least in this passage, the contrary is the case: Being more or less available is presented as a personal attribute by another employee a little further on in the group discussion from which this quote is taken. The initial employee (quoted here) does not object to this characterisation. In his statement, he first criticises servile and insinuating behaviour and then recalls having to be sufficiently available himself as a duty and precondition for getting his own interests recognised. The following discussion shows how close practices of distinction lie together in terms of both directions of showing 'too little' and 'too much'

availability. Both function to legitimate one's own level of and participation in availability demonstrations and competition: Joining in management's individualising strategy appears to be acceptable as long as these practices remain within what is viewed as proportional and as long as the management requests can be justified by one's own interests and needs. Employees need to define a moral limit here and present themselves as respecting it. They sense the destructive effect of their individual agency on workplace solidarity or at least on the atmosphere among colleagues, not to speak of the limited effects in terms of individual action potential, acquired recognition, actual employment growth or better work conditions. However, the quote also demonstrates that the definition of proportionality is contentious among colleagues.

*Mario: Some other people, they really need to do such things, they need to be always available. They are all alone, have to pay an apartment. When superiors tell them to do, don't know, five hours today, they do it, they just have to follow the orders. But that girl at the central cash desk, she doesn't need to do this, she doesn't need to do 4 or 5 hours a day. But she always does, she does all the overtime she is asked for, she's even working at the central cash, the reception, with a fourth level only.*

*André: Well, what do you think why she does it, eh? To get something. Just as I do. Why do I give any availability? Because I do what I should not do: because I want them to see me, I want to stand out, but for sure.*

*Mario: But there is a limit, a limit. How many years is it that she is in this situation?*

*André: Yes, but this limit is personal. You might get frustrated and give up after two weeks, me maybe after two years. This depends from person to person*

*(André/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm G; Mario/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm G)*

Employees here again present the realisation of their own interests and needs as conditional on their respected duties, labour performance, and given availability - but not as unconditional rights. This reliance on the above described concept of 'fair exchange' appears to be crucial for making the double practice of distinction work. It also contributes to the limited character of gained action potential. The perception of conditionality undoubtedly reflects interviewees' everyday experiences with unequal power relations at their work places. Yet, the quote also shows how this conditionality is effectively internalised, and thus, prevents claims for limited labour requirements and less precarious work conditions to emerge as claims for one's own and collectively guaranteed rights.

In line with the justification of one's own availability strategies by the pursuit of work related

interests, a further strategy of distinction consists in underlining particular personal needs and/or increased precarity of one's own, still personalised, employment and living conditions. This most often takes the form of differentiating oneself as an individual household from younger colleagues who still live with their parents: Instead of criticising the management's strategies as being responsible for their precarious employment position, thanks to this distinction, the young colleagues' availability demonstrations appear as unnecessary and as the actual source of problems.

Finally, however, making distinctions is not necessarily linked to the internalisation of management's flexibility requirements and the legitimisation of one's own availability demonstrations. In contrast, some employees justify their own consciously limited labour performances and attempts of border drawing by making a distinction between themselves and colleagues who are too ambitious, as will be emphasised again later on.

### 8.1.3 Transferring conflicts

Transferring conflicts happens when specific conflict reasons – although not necessarily the experienced conflicts themselves – are hidden, dismissed or reduced in their relevance due to storytelling that focusses on other, only partial conflict aspects and explanations. This 'un-naming' especially concerns the conflicting character of management strategies and labour requirements – and of structural features of the labour process and underlying interest differences. Conflicts are transferred, instead, to the realm of personal interactions with colleagues, superiors, and customers. As is shown in the following, this transfer to personalisation goes hand in hand with an inability to question given conditions and a perception of reduced possibilities for agency and change. Yet, the interpersonal conflict aspects underlined in employees' accounts all reflect actual conflict experiences. Their presentation also entails an appropriation of meaning, as it again sustains their good work performance.

In a previous section, personalisation was referred to several times as part of employees' adaptive coping practices. It considered demands for their good work performances, the attribution of individual's availability demonstrations to personal character (see the discussion of fair exchange and moral values as well as the diverse practices of distinction), the personalisation of conflicts and shop floor relations in direct interactions with superiors, and the explanation of a failed career with personal deficits as well as the justification of their entitlements to employment stabilisation based on personal needs. Due to its importance, personalisation now is discussed in more detail as a coping practice on its own.

The next quote demonstrates how practices of distinction (as exemplified in the above quotes of the same interviewee) turn into a personalisation and a transfer of conflict reasons onto colleagues, due to their reference to concepts of fair exchange and work ethic.

*Eric: There are some employees who take advantage of certain things. That's why the firms have found some middle way. Why don't they employ you full-time right away? They say, well, now I do the mistake to take you in full-time, but maybe you are the kind of person that pretends to be a role model employee for the first six month, and then you start, one week at home, one week at work, one week at home. In my opinion, this is important for how things go with our contracts and so on. (...) It's not that I feel responsible for firm results. It's because we take care of our own ass. As long as everything goes well, the firm pays us. But, if they put us into franchising, there won't be any big firm behind us anymore to support all these employees. (...) Listen, I don't say that everybody should do more than his part, but at least do your part. I see so many that rely on others. They say, well, anyway, there is that other guy that does the work for me, so I don't have to do it, I can just take a break... (...) In my opinion, management already has its plans ready; they already know which shops they can count on, the profitable ones. With this franchising, they want to test, reducing the costs in the other shops, where they can arrive, what's the limit. But, this way, they also destroy the social relations. That's why we have so many quarrels and cheating among colleagues. It's a game they play that makes you behave like this (Eric/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

It is interesting to note that certain analytical capacities, namely the recognition of management's strategy of cost reduction as a cause of tensions among colleagues, can apparently go hand in hand with a personalisation and transfer of conflict reasons on colleagues. Thus, in the beginning of the passage, employees who lack a sense of responsibility and willingness to work appear as the reason for the precarisation of employment positions. One's own interests (in job safety) appear as an autonomous motivation for 'good' labour performance and responsibility. In contrast, the (also) forced character of this availability, produced by management's cost reduction strategy, is not mentioned at all. Instead, the experienced fear of franchising is tackled with a self-responsibilising call towards all colleagues for better work performances - and thus for an adaptation to management's requests and strategies. Franchising is recognised as a purposeful, profit-driven management strategy. At the same time, it remains presented as an unquestioned given condition and economic necessity. As for other coping practices, this perception reflects daily power relations that are experienced. But, the lack of questioning given conditions and

claiming alternatives limits the development of any forms of conflictive, enlarged action potential. It is, in fact, itself an expression of the latter's limited character.

Complaints about colleagues' lacking morale at work also point to a conflict of solidarity in the work process: When colleagues reject labour requirements on an individual basis, it prevents aspirations for collective responsibility for the work process. Such responsibility might be considered an ideological issue, put forward by management's normative control strategies. But, in everyday experience, it expresses an effective desire and need for workplace solidarity, resulting from interrelated work tasks within a shift-based work organisation, and all the more from a situation of latent understaffing. Colleagues that do not do all of their job effectively leave work to others. The same holds true for experiences of cheating and competition. The point here is not to say that these experiences would not exist. It is how they are interpreted, in a personalised way, and justifying them with the flawed character of colleagues that is criticised here. Transferring conflicts in this way onto colleagues is a coping practice by which employees simultaneously enact and try to protect themselves from constant, unlimited requirements of competitive behaviour. As in the aforementioned case regarding the internalised logic of merit, coping by personalising and naturalising conflicts makes invisible as conflict reason the structural and management-induced character of competition and cheating (i.e. as resulting from availability pressures).

As already mentioned in chapter seven, transferring conflicts onto colleagues doesn't mean that employees would necessarily develop anti-solidarity behaviours. Instead, for Eric such a transfer is combined with a strong criticism of cheating, lacking solidarity, and reduced collective agency. And vice versa, cheating can be combined with shop floor solidarity. As is discussed later when examining collective action potential, the latter also functions through a personalisation of social relations. Considering the described coping practices of distinction, personalisation, and transfers of conflicts onto colleagues, management's normative and individualising, blackmailing, and merit-based control strategies seem to result in what Ezzy names 'aggressive instrumental individualism' (Ezzy 2001). As described above, the latter would be characterised by strong peer group pressure to conform to given labour requirements and a rivalry to obtain individual performance rewards. Yet, unlike Ezzy's argument, this individualism does not seem to necessarily disturb employees' commitment to a workplace community – be it a simulated and management induced means of normative control or based on actual shop floor solidarity within the work process. Instead, cheating and rivalry among colleagues are both a source of frustration and dissatisfaction with work conditions and (similar to informal arguments with direct superiors) as an effective security

valve for experienced frustration and pressures. At the same time, the joint coping practices help to contain the conflicts of underlying individualising and competitive management strategies.

Another common form of personalisation, also described in the literature (Ferrerias 2003/2004), is to justify conflicts and tensions among female colleagues because women allegedly would have a natural inclination towards jealousy and quarrelling. The following quote gives a brief example of this pattern. It is taken from an interview with a 42-year-old permanent part-time cashier who has worked in the firm C2 for five years.

*Elena: As with all kinds of work, there are positive and negative aspects. Positive is that I really like it a lot to be in contact with customers. This is work you manage practically in this way. On the negative side, you know, because we are so many women in here, there can be a lot of jealousy or envy. Anyway, you can find these things everywhere, also in an office. (...) The thing is that here we are so many women. So, there definitely is envy. (...) It's not linked to the work, also beyond, at the personal level. They are watching everything, really everything. (...) This really is because we are so many women, this kind of gossip and cheating exists only among women. Really, in the most absolute sense, this is the negative aspect of my current job now (Elena /permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C2).*

In a similar way, female cashiers interviewed by Ferreras in Belgian supermarkets refer to themselves as always jealous, always fighting, snaky, and cheating by character. Such self-representations indicate the effectiveness of gender stereotypes within employees' common sense. As Ferreras points out, they reflect the internalisation of low social status attributed to female dominated cashier work.

A more subtle way of transferring conflicts can be detected where a lot of dissatisfaction with the current work situation is implicitly present in the interviews, but the only openly expressed conflicts concern personal relations with colleagues. Beyond actual conflict experiences in social interactions at the shop floor, such a one-sided account of work related problems appears as a creation of an alternative conflict field, bringing other tensions, namely experienced precarisation, out of sight. This coping practice reduces both the perceived tensions on other conflict levels and the perception of one's own limited action potential and necessities for intervention and agency. This is also the case for the last quote where cheating among female colleagues is presented as the only negative aspect of work – despite other difficulties mentioned in other instances of the interview, especially part-time wage and a stressful workload.



In terms of relations with superiors, experienced conflicts in direct interactions are equally attributed to a personal character and their competencies.<sup>220</sup> Instead of emphasising tensions in one field to forget other fields, personalisation here reduces the need for and scope of experienced conflicts on this very same level: Conflicts with superiors are ‘only’ due to personal traits, not to overall work conditions or even the structure of labour relations. Conflicts are framed as being caused by superiors’ personal ‘incapacity’ or ‘misbehaviour’ to explain violations of employees’ justice expectations, which, in this way, can be held up against a contrary work reality. This coping practice also reflects the importance of personal relations in a context of individualised informal labour relations. Yet, on all levels of personalisation, perceived possibilities for change and the necessities for enhancing one’s agency turn out to be limited due to this kind of cognitive coping: As resulting from personality and/or from ‘natural’ characteristics (as in the stereotype of jealous women fighting), there is nothing that can be done against these conflicts; they just have to be endured, for example by (verbally) criticising the problematic behaviour of others. Personalisation plays a double role here: It functions as security valve for pent up frustration and is a means to channel conflicts. Simultaneously, it produces a ‘culture of tolerance’ (Ferreras, 2003/2004) inducing acceptance of any kind of ‘personal’ behaviour or opinion. As Ferreras shows, instead of fostering actively lived solidarity, this makes it difficult for employees to develop and voice any clear critiques.<sup>221</sup>

Personalisation with regard to superiors has been present in several of the so far presented interview passages. Therefore, only a short example is provided here, extending a quote referred to in the chapter on work task conflicts (7.1.4, p. 222). It was introduced above as an example of experiencing lacking autonomy in the work process. Beyond personalisation, this passage also points back to employees’ claim to be recognised for their work process knowledge and their good work performance. This claim is enforced through distinction from superiors’ supposed incompetence. Talking about a disagreement with the director about how to organise the work tasks of a specific day, the interviewee, a permanent part-time sales clerk at firm G (aged 23, and five years in the firm) concludes as follows:

---

<sup>220</sup> For the same argument, see Ferreras 2003/2004: 508f and Hall & Atkinson 2006.

<sup>221</sup> Such a culture of tolerance seems to indicate a strangely indefinite character of justice concepts. This contrasts interviewees’ precise, merit-bound moral justice expectations and their demand for their own moral integrity to be respected, which is central to their sense of a ‘fair exchange’ and their practices of distinction as a coping practice. It is another example of the ‘bizarre’ and incoherent composition of employees’ common sense.

*André: I said, not really in a loud voice, but he (the director) heard it anyway: 'Everybody is just good in talking here' (...) It's him (the director) who really is not able to do these things. The director we have now simply isn't competent in his job. He never did this before, and doesn't have any experience. The other day, while I was working at the cash desk, he was around just when the receipt roll was finished, the paper of the roll. I asked: 'You know how to change it?' And he: 'No.' You get it, this is the director, but he doesn't even know how to change the roll. He doesn't know how to do things. That's why he panics just for nothing and we have all this stress in here (André/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm G).*

Finally, transfer of conflicts and personalisation can also be found at the third level of social relations in the retail work process, the interaction with customers. The service relationship emerged as a central field of conflict in employees' everyday experiences. While tensions arise for many reasons, when it comes to explicitly naming conflict origins, the bad behaviour and personal character of individual customers is often stressed.

This does not mean that employees don't recognise the stress produced by management's strategies and the associated service and labour requirements and conditions. Instead, placing emphasis on the fault of customers seems to be a convenient way to vent some of employees' restrained frustrations. These get shifted onto a third party. At the same time, confrontation with single customers represents the most immediate level on which conflicts resulting from management's requirements are effectively experienced. Consequently, they generate the most vivid conflict stories. Yet, insisting on customers' bad behaviour also contributes to channelling and making experienced conflicts relative. These appear as part of the 'natural' burdens of frontline service and emotional labour. In contrast, and as a result, where interviewees insist on customer conflicts, management strategies of cost reduction receive rather marginal attention as conflict reasons.

The following interview passage shows how personalisation and criticism of management's strategies can go hand in hand. Personalisation here concerns a further level, employees' own personality. What is pronounced in this case is insisting on the individual personality as a reason for one's good work performance, which serves as an appropriation of meaning.

*Eric: You know what's the point: it all depends on the person. Oh, it happens also to me, the day I have my own problems that I don't manage to see even one of the customers that pass me by at the cashier. It's a question of character, humour. (...) The only thing about work at the cash desk, it's not the control over the money. It's precisely the contact with the customer, the way you talk with him. (...) The work of a cashier should be exactly this: To keep the customer as calm as possible in case of conflicts. You have to keep him good, you understand, when he comes there complaining about anything. Not to say:*

*'Hey, mister, what do you want from me?' It happens even to me to say this, but it shouldn't, as a professional. However, it's also them (management) who put you in this situation. For example if there are eight cash desks, but they keep only two open (Eric/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

*Daniele: It's not that it is difficult with the customers; it's just a normal, part of the job, nothing else. (...) There are these heavy days, where there's too much work, and then maybe somebody offends you just like that, without a reason, and you just get crazy, eh, maybe you give an incorrect answer. That's not good for you. (...) The customer is always right here. Everybody says so, also the firm, our bosses. The customer is always right and you have to leave him in peace, even if he offends you. Maybe it's because of the heat, he might have taken too much sun or whatever (Daniele/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm G).*

In the second quote, the causal relation between stressful labour requirements (too much work) and customer conflicts is recognised. But, it is immediately connected to personal behaviour (answering badly) by the interviewee himself. The fault in this conflict seems to lie in the employee who does not respect the 'customer as king' logic as an unquestioned given.

#### 8.1.4 Conflict reduction

Besides transferring experienced conflicts onto third parties, employees use other rhetoric patterns that help to reduce experienced conflicts and pressures. This section considers different forms of normalising, externalising or transferring conflicts into the future, as well as practices of comparison and counterbalancing.

As indicated above, large scale retailing traditionally represents a transitory labour market primarily for young employees. This transient character also finds its expression in employees meaning constructions. Especially those experiencing strong frustration in their current employment position harbour intense transition expectations, as the following example shows:

*Mario: Right now, I would say, well, if I could, as soon as I find, if I have an opportunity... . The thing is that, it also isn't easy to find something else. But, as soon as I find and all, if I manage, I go away from this job. Because, I really don't like it anymore.*

*Int: Are you searching for something else right now?*

*Mario: No, honestly, I don't really search. Because I hoped that things might change a bit here, and all. But, when I come back from the holidays in September, if the situation is still the same, and well, that's*

*the point, I think it's going to be the same, for sure I will search for something else. Well, it's not sure that I will really go work somewhere else. Also now, I see many of my friends, those that maybe even did university, at the end they would sign a contract to work in a supermarket. For this reason, yes*  
(Mario/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm G).

A perception of the current, permanent employment position as an only temporary affair, together with hopes in a better future at another firm or self-employment, renders unpleasant work conditions more bearable. It limits employees' identification with the present job. The precariousness of the current employment position itself can be used as a resource for coping as it gives a reason for reducing one's identification with the work. This is the case when temporary contracts are considered as a transitional phase – at least as long as the belief in employment stabilisation within the current firm has not been eroded yet. With this practice, the solution of currently experienced conflicts is transferred into the future. This could also be considered as an additional form of adapting one's expectations in the current job to existing conditions. Mostly, in parallel to such a transfer into the future, interviewees reflect current transformations of the retail labour market towards a more and more long-term, though continuously precarious, employment sector. Employees recognise how difficult it is to find another job, as the above complaint about limited labour market alternatives demonstrates. Yet, in contrast to this perception, the majority of interviewees still view their current work as a necessary transitional phase of their life course.

This is all the more problematic as interviewees' capacities to project themselves into the future appear to be limited. Transition aspirations can be interpreted as a sign that employees have taken on attitudes of self-marketisation in terms of flexible, self-responsible labour market orientations. However, they seem to miss the necessary resources to enact these attitudes.<sup>222</sup> Considering alternative jobs mostly remains on the level of dreams without employees undertaking concrete steps to plan and realise them. Where they do, they express frustration about the encountered difficulties to pursue a second job or alternative training due to their irregular work times. Or, they hold so pessimistic attitudes about their labour market position that no realistic, appealing alternatives can be identified - as in the interview with André from firm G who holds the opinion that employment trajectories would be equally precarious everywhere and require a new start at the low end of the job hierarchy.

Such pessimistic labour market perceptions go hand in hand with a further practice of conflict

---

<sup>222</sup> As introduced above in the Italian context, Fullin points to this lack of projecting capacities, in analysing the work experiences of pseudo-self-employed project workers (Fullin 2004).

reduction: The comparison of one's work conditions with those in other firms or sectors and the idea of similarly bad or even worse conditions elsewhere.

*André: But, so to say, at G we are still fine.*

*Eric: Oh, yes, the situation in E...*

*André: In E, oh, there they make them do fourteen hours per day, they make them do three hours of break in the middle. In two months of work there, a friend of mine lost 10kg. When he returned home, he ate and slept, nothing else.*

*Eric: And there, really, they control you, every step, to see whether you are working or not. There it's like fascism. Here, in G, it's a bit more of a family atmosphere.*

*Daniele: Let me tell you one thing: Thank God we work in a place where in the summer we have air conditioning and in the winter we have heating. If you see those that work outside, always in the rain or in the heat. And you, you are inside, and you even complain, that your work is heavy. But, honestly, what heavy work? Working as a cashier is heavy? Look at them!*

*(André/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm G; Daniele/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm G; Eric/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G)*

Comparing oneself to others with worse situations apparently functions to hold up one's own moral. As realistic as it might be with regard to an overall trend of precarisation, it also reduces legitimacy of one's claims for better work conditions. It produces a normalisation of experienced conditions: What is presented as 'normal' simply appears as less problematic. The comparison, thus, constitutes an effective way to render experienced conflicts at the workplace less important and to accept them as given conditions. This also occurs with respect to the 'normal' stressful and conflictive character of service labour - as in the above quote from Daniele.<sup>223</sup> The same interviewee also gives an example of how such effective, realistic everyday knowledge can serve as a way of border drawing: It helps to reject impossible requests of emotional labour, such as having a continuous smile. The above quote continues as follows (8.1.3: p. 306):

*Int: And, while you talk with the customers, do have the feeling that you have to represent the firm? Like having to keep a nice smile for the firm image?*

---

<sup>223</sup> Fullin and Ferreras point to practices of reducing conflict by means of comparison as well. Comparison is rigorously limited to others with the same employment status in Fullin's sample, excluding from the picture those who have achieved a more desirable employment situation. Such reference to the same employment status is less explicit in this study. Instead, comparison is limited to those in even harder work conditions, be they in different retail firms or in other professions (Fullin 2004). Ferreras' interviews indicate the normalisation of customer conflicts as an important practice by which employees react to and adapt to the encountered work conflicts and internalise the customer-king imperative (Ferreras 2003/2004: 510).

*Daniele: No, I don't think so much about the firm. It's my own personality (...) No, if this is a bad day for me, why should I have to smile? No, I do represent only myself. Everybody does what is his character, his mode. If it's a person that likes to make jokes, ok, if you are sensitive, ok, as long as you don't act rude in front of the customer, that's normal (Daniele/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm G).*

As it is 'normal' that people are different and have alternative modes and moods; it is also acceptable not to have to smile at every moment. Yet, as the above quote illustrates, management's customer-king logic is legitimised and accepted as a given here, simply due to its daily experienced omnipresence and hence 'normal' existence.

Further forms of normalisation appeared in various instances in the quotes used in chapter seven to illuminate employees' conflict experiences: An important and frequent case is the definition of temporary employment by interviewees themselves as a normal, necessary transition period. Here, normalisation has conflict appeasing and endurance fostering effects. For, these 'transition periods' are actually experienced as highly problematic with regard to experienced blackmailing pressures (see 7.1.1). A second, less conflictive case is the perception of limited formalised flexibility of shift patterns as normal. Third, also Luca's (C1) acceptance of a flexible, irregular (though illegal) part-time work schedule as part of the role and reason for which he has been employed (to cover up holes between his colleagues' full-time shifts) falls into this category of normalisation (see 7.1.3). Similarly, Elena (C2) accepts the task of monitoring letters in case of shortfalls in the daily cash accounts despite her frustration with late and nontransparent control procedures (see 7.2.1). Finally, the interim worker Mimmo complains about unclear responsibilities provided to him by his superior:

*Mimmo: The status of a promoter is vaguely defined. (...) And your responsible supervisor is never present. (...) They do these things on purpose. It's typically Italian. This way, when you try to complain about something, they'll always say: 'No, sorry, but you've said... that other person has said...' And it's just not true. These are all multinationals now, if you try to complain, it's always the fault of the others, the English, the French. Like that, you can never arrive at anything (Mimmo/part-time interim worker, promoter, firm C2).*

While criticising a purposeful masking of responsibilities and explaining this conflict by structural features of multinational corporations, it is naturalised by attributing this problem to 'the typical Italian' way of organising.

Eventually, another example for normalisation is employees' reference to economic necessities as if these were natural laws that justify everything.<sup>224</sup> This is especially the case for the use of temporary contracts and the likelihood of obtaining a permanent contract. Or, isuch naturalisation is used to give a reason to one's overall negative employment prospects. In addition, economic necessities appear as an argument when talking about disliked firm hierarchies or stress experienced due to understaffing. All these issues are presented as necessary outcomes of economic rationality. As a consequence, they are not perceived as contingent interest conflicts, expressions of power relations, and potential grounds for struggle. The following is a short example from a young and recent temporary part-time sales clerk employed for a year at firm I with short breaks between contracts:

*Gianni: I hope that they will give me a permanent contract later. I hope, we'll see later. I've seen it with some colleagues: What is important to stay, to receive a permanent contract, is how good you are in doing your job. And then, above all, it depends on the available hours, on what is needed to do the department's work. In my department there have not always been free hours, so not all colleagues could get a permanent contract (Gianni/temporary part-time contract, salesclerk, firm I).*

That management's employment decisions depend on the firm's or department's overall workforce need, can be simply interpreted as an acknowledgement of the existing firm logic. Yet, such reasoning omits management's strategies of understaffing, flexible hole filling, and the use of temporary as well as part-time employment as a constant practice, irrespective of a higher or lower workforce need. In this way, the availability of 'free' hours turns into a natural given. The Employee's meaning constructions leave no room for recognising that there could be enough 'free' hours, if actually constant temporary employment (though with changing employees) would be transferred into permanent contracts right away. Of course, this would go against management's economic interest in a flexible adjustment of staff numbers to turnover that lies behind the temporary and part-time employment strategy. But, to get able to claim a permanent contract against the prevailing management logic, one has to name the latter as a specific interest and not only a given, unquestionable rule following economic 'necessities'. In contrast, if this is the case, even arguing in favour of economic rationality can be turned into a conflictive practice. As the following quote from another employee in the same firm shows, it can be used to criticise what is perceived as irrational management behaviour. This criticism is voiced by an older permanent part-time stock operator, aged 32 and having worked at that place for seven years .

---

<sup>224</sup> See also Fullin 2004 for this practice.

*Giuseppe: Work in the stocks is deteriorating a lot right now. (...) On the one hand there is practically an interdiction to work full-time: in the sense that: 'No, I don't give you the eight hours, because, no, it's bad for your back.' Because of the hard work and the heavy things to lift and carry, at least that's what they say. But, then, in the end, they give me so many trolleys and orders to manage at the same time, just to save time, because, anyway I have to go that way through the stocks and then I also can take everything at once. This is not rational, in the end this produces even more problems for the back, and more work, too. Because, in this way, in the end I even have to re-divide all these different orders before handing them over to the customer service. This is inefficient for everybody. And this is where the fundamental contradiction lies. In reality, the thing is really simple: It's that they don't want to increase your hours, because there are some staff numbers to be respected and to be adjusted according to the turnover of goods (Giuseppe/ permanent part-time contract, stock operator, firm I).*

A final form of reducing the weight of conflicts can be considered as complementary to the comparison with worse situations: In a very simple but effective way, employees tend to follow the description of an experienced problem by underlining other positive aspects of their current work. Thus, they 'counter-balance' the negative experiences and give a reason why, in the end, the situation altogether is not that bad.

*Int: In 5 years, do you still imagine yourself in this job?*

*Elena: Well, from time to time there is the idea to go away. Well, when you are really fed up. Then you say: 'Damn it, I have to find another job.' But then you say: 'No, but no, I like to be here, I like this kind of work, the colleagues.' So, in 5 years, I can tell you yes, I'll still be here (Elena /permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C2).*

While presented here as a practice of reducing conflicts, such a valorising of positive aspects also reflects employees' actual interests and their resulting ambiguous positioning with regard to their job. But, the discursive effect remains that of a reduction of conflict relevance as the reasons for limited interest realisation are not explicitly named nor clear differentiations drawn between positive experiences and not or only partially realised aspirations. Similarly, unresolved conflict experiences and contradictions remain, as for example in the case of Alice (firm D) and her simultaneous appreciation and discontent about (only) informally assigned and recognised additional work tasks and competencies. Despite her strong frustration about being blocked at a low official qualification and pay level, she does not consider rejecting additional tasks or entering into any struggle for their official recognition.



## *8.2 Appropriation of meaning, border drawing and conflictive negotiation*

After having so far analysed mainly those practices by which employees adapt themselves to the encountered labour requirements, the analysis now takes a more detailed look at practices of border drawing, appropriation of meanings, and conflictive negotiations over work conditions. This concerns employees' practices of distancing themselves from work as well as maintaining their autonomy in the face of it. It might take the form of (a) giving one's own meaning to the work context and one's labour performance, (b) mentally distancing oneself from the work context, (c) rejecting given labour requirements and control attempts by limiting one's own availability, or (d) raising demands and negotiating for one's aspirations and interests. These two sets of coping practices, the various adaptive strategies presented so far, and the more conflictive practices of appropriation, border drawing, and negotiation are not to be understood as dualist oppositions. As was argued above, adaptation, instead of representing any linear internalisation, goes hand in hand with an appropriation of meaning and (limited) action potential. Drawing borders between oneself and the encountered labour requirements, trying to limit labour performance, and appropriating decision or definition powers over one's work conditions, in turn, does not necessarily exclude internalisation of management's logics, such as merit.

In order to underline this linked character of adaptive and oppositional, resisting<sup>225</sup> forms of coping, this section shows interviewees' practices of appropriating meaning explicitly in their ambiguous character in internalising as well as rejecting labour requirements. What might on a first glance seem as a repetition - such practices were introduced above regarding employees' insisting on their good work performance as part of rule internalisation - is a purposeful and necessary step revealing the dialectics of coping. Subsequently, this analysis also includes various practices of border drawing: first, with regard to normative control and subjectification, and second, regarding labour requirements of flexibility and availability. Finally, practices of conflictive negotiation are addressed. They concern the ways that employees enter into active confrontation with given requirements and conditions not simply

---

<sup>225</sup> The term 'resistance' is to be viewed cautiously when addressing employees' more conflictive coping practices. These rarely result in open conflicts or struggles. 'Resistance' tends to suggest a clear opposition to and an effective illusion from management's control attempts. The encountered coping practices have a much more ambiguous character, combining submission and resistance. Similarly, the term 'adaptation' instead of 'submission' is used to describe employees' adaptive practices in coping with problems in a non conflictive way. This does not negate or buffer the power relations that influence and find their expression in employees' coping practices. In fact, – by adopting individual availability strategies, embracing given rules (of merit, inclusion-exclusion or economic necessity) as moral or natural standards, and normalising blackmailing pressures and experienced conflicts, employees submit themselves to required labour requirements. But, the aim here is to highlight employees' active stance, their own subjective involvement, and their struggles for action potential, which produces submission as well as resistance. This should be remembered even when the latter two terms are used.

by withdrawing and limiting their labour performance, but by openly raising demands and trying to enforce these through negotiation processes with their superiors.

As with other coping practices distinguished here, the division line between appropriations of meaning, mental border drawing, effective rejection of labour requirements, and conflictive negotiation is a thin and permeable one. For example, border drawing also entails an appropriation of meaning, in terms of maintaining one's values and concepts of good work, responsibility or service quality, and underlining their difference to management requests. Practices of effective border drawing between work and life and rejection of labour requirements are sustained by these kinds of intrinsically motivated, committed appropriations of meaning.

### 8.2.1 Appropriation of meaning: service knowledge and personalisation

By appropriating meaning, employees claim as their own decision powers and autonomous agency in work situations and conflicts they are experiencing. Even before any concrete agency, appropriation concerns employees' practices of giving meaning to and reinterpreting labour requirements according to their own aspirations and interests in work.

A common pattern here is personalisation. As could be seen in various instances above, employees refer extensively to their own personality, character, and competencies. So far, employees' consciousness and understanding of their own good work performance has been described as a way to cope with their management's requirements for unlimited availability and the respective logic of merit. It was also shown how employees, with their concepts of good work, precisely reproduce these requirements – defining their own good performance as that which complies with the given rules of the game. The following discussion focusses on different aspects of such concepts of good work. Specifically, on how employees claim a definition power over their work performance and its meaning by linking the performance to their own personality, their competencies, and service values.

In this, transferring and internalising conflicts, and appropriating meaning and action potential evidently lie close together. Ascribing conflict experiences to one's own personality can be considered an expression of effective subjectification and internalisation, reflecting the management's requests for self-regulation – as well as employees' own intrinsic interests in autonomy, self-responsibility, and recognition. Postulating good work performance as a question of one's character or competencies turns employees' subjectivity into both a potential source and solution of conflicts. Claiming their own personal involvement, responsibility, and competencies, employees position themselves as active, autonomous

subjects within the labour process – as seen above with regard to employees' perception over the choice of accepting or rejecting management's availability requests. Such a (mental) self-positioning makes experienced frustration and conflicts more easily bearable. It contributes to procuring necessary action potential even where one's actual control and possibilities for realising one's aspirations are limited. Beyond such adaptation, affirming one's values and competencies against management's requests can induce practices of border drawing, of distancing from work, and rejecting requirements. It can potentially be seen as a first step towards acquiring consciousness of conflict and effective struggle capacities. At the same time, Lloyd and Payne's argument should be remembered that portraying work as skilled is also part of management's normative control strategies, trying to foster commitment to service quality. In fact, service competencies are defined by managers as closely linked to personality (Lloyd/Payne 2008). Taking into consideration this management perspective, the risk of turning coping with bad service conditions and work organisation into a question of individual's competences, responsibility and self-discipline might become even more obvious. Employees' practices of personalisation in their integrative effects, producing conflict internalisation, are considered next. Then, a brief look is given at how such an appropriation of meaning fosters practices of border drawing – while a detailed analysis of the latter is left to the following section. Finally, attention turns to the transfer of conflicts to the private sphere, which personalisation entails.

Examples of such a personalisation were provided above, especially in two interview passages from firm G, regarding André's comment on the personal limits of availability demonstrations (8.1.3, p. 299) and Daniele's insistence on personality types determining more or less responsible and available work attitudes (8.1.1, p. 284). The following is an example of employees' sense of responsibility for company results.

*Int: And, in your opinion, is there a firm strategy to make employees feel more responsible in their work?*

*Elena: Well, listen, I do have a certain character, so that you can make me do whatever you want, and I'll always be a very responsible person. In fact, maybe even too much. Well, even if they don't give me that responsibility, I'll take it on anyway. Because, I know that if I have to do work, I have to do it good. That's why I put all of myself into it. I'm just made like this.*

*Int: Why did you say 'even too much'?*

*Elena: Because, many times I realise that I get, that I get to an excess, that I could let go quite a lot of things. But instead... it's getting stressful. Many of my colleagues don't care, they go home and that's it, calm. Me, instead, if I see that something doesn't run well, until I don't manage to solve that problem, I*

*keep thinking about it. I take it home (Elena /permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C2).*

From this quote it can be seen clearly how a responsible work attitude is claimed as one's own attribute and interest. It doesn't simply arise from a passive internalisation of or identification with company goals. In other instances, the same interviewee presents herself as rather disinterested in management's attempts to create a corporate identity. At the same time, she is aware of the problems generated by self-responsibility in terms of unlimited work. However, this conflict remains unsolved, as the stress is framed as a consequence of her personal character, without linking it to a concrete labour requirement or work conditions. As such, the experienced stress feels like an unchangeable condition, determined by her personality traits – personal characteristics that are also seen as an asset. This interpretation of one's own responsible work attitude as both a desirable quality and a personal fault producing stress makes addressing conflicts even more difficult. Enduring stress implicitly occurs as part of employees' positive self-construction as a responsible person and worker. Moreover, resulting conflicts and problems are not only internalised, but transferred to other spheres of life: They are 'taken home'. This means that their negative effects, as well as their solutions, are externalised and have to be dealt with in private life. Again, this situation is taken as a given, without causing any protest, even verbal, in the rest of the interview.

The internalisation of conflicts is more clearly evident in the following examples:

*Chiara: Yes, yes, I feel responsible, also in front of the customers. That you treat them well. You mustn't treat them badly. This is always a responsibility, too. Also the fear not to fight. Because, there is always one customer who is getting on your nerves. I do swallow and keep silent, let them talk. But, this is because that is my character. With everybody, not only with customers. But, there are also others that shout back at them. (...) Well, it depends on your character: Are you are strong enough not to answer, or to answer in an educated way. Otherwise... (Chiara/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C1).*

*Elena: Well, I get angry inside of me. I say to myself: 'Damn shit, I was right.' And then, well, maybe later they (superiors) might also come to you and say that, ok, you were right, but you just have to act in a way that the customer.... (Elena /permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C2).*

In an everyday work reality, staying calm in front of customers is an effective coping practice to deal with emerging conflicts in the service interaction. And the interviewee here underlines it as her capacity linked to her character. Yet, the only way to deal with frustration that appears to remain under these conditions is further internalisation: keeping feelings and anger

to oneself. This form of coping could be interpreted as a hidden way to let off steam. It demonstrates the high degree of self-control employees are expected to effectuate in frontline service. Interestingly, none of the interviewees refers to any collective ways in digesting conflicts, such as slandering together about disliked customers and supporting each other, either practically during the conflict or offering moral support afterwards, as is extensively described in the labour process studies in call centres (Bolton/Boyd 2003; Korczynski 2003; Pentimalli 2009). The only source of recognition so far seems to be either individual (affirming one's correct behaviour and moral integrity inside oneself) or linked to superiors' reactions (ex-post recognition of conflict reasons).<sup>226</sup>

For Eric (G), managing the service interaction is a question of character and ability to stay calm. This could be seen in the above quoted passages regarding the transfer of conflicts onto customers' bad behaviour (8.1.4). Beyond internalising responsibility, the account of this interviewee shows how personalisation can constitute a basis for limiting requested responsibility and maintaining a realistic view of the conditions and limits of emotional labour. A further example of the appropriation of such border drawing capacities can be found in the statements made by Elena when she insists on her inability to always have a smile in front of customers, especially against her own character and mood (7.2.2, p. 229).

Making reference to one's own character appears as a powerful resource for border drawing, as it seems to set an absolute limit on emotional labour requests or any other requirement that the interviewee does not 'feel like doing'. Yet, there is a crucial difference between the argumentative strategies of both interviewees which lies in their concepts of good work. His own good service work is perceived by Eric not only as a question of his natural and unchangeable character. The capacity to handle customer conflicts is also expressed as part of a cashier's professional competences. This implies a need for service knowledge, which is acquired through experience and qualification, rather than determined only by character traits. As a consequence, reasons for stress and conflicts can be connected by Eric more clearly and directly to overall service conditions and management's respective strategies. It is on the basis of one's own competencies that management's 'customer is king' logic can be rejected. In contrast, for Elena the central responsibility for stressful experiences remains internalised and individualised, linked to her character. However, in earlier parts of the interview she referred to scarce staff coverage as a reason for the stressful work load. The point is not that she is not aware of this connection. But rather that it gets covered up by the insistence on personal

---

<sup>226</sup> This issue will be referred back on in the following chapter.

character traits. This makes it unreachable for developing any perspectives of change and rejecting the present condition. The following passage exemplifies Eric's sense of his own competencies of being technically capable of handling certain work tasks:

*Int: Do I understand you right: It is important for you that customers thank you for the service?*

*Eric: For me yes, it is. Also when I was still working at the fish counter, I did those little tasks for them, cleaning the fish, maybe preparing fillets, and they told me: 'Hey, you are good in doing this, good job.' For me, this has always been a satisfaction. Not something continuous, always the same. If the management doesn't understand it, at least the customers do; and that's a good thing (Eric/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

Eric underlines how his service knowledge gives him access to an important alternative source of recognition, independent from management's logic of merit and availability: customer satisfaction. This knowledge might be recognised directly in the service interaction by the customer. Another way to obtain officially denied recognition (especially in terms of professional growth) is employees' reinterpretation of informal work tasks, responsibilities or overtime hours given to them as a sign of positive approval and trust in their work performance. Such an interpretation might reflect the reasons for management's choice of whom to assign the extra tasks. Yet, frequently it goes hand in hand with omitting simultaneous blackmailing pressures. It leaves management's strategies of differentiation unconsidered while reproducing them at the same time.

In sum, affirming one's own competencies as well as gaining external recognition constitutes a form of self assertion that helps in facing a context where contradictions between management's strategies of customer orientation and cost reduction cause constant pressures, conflictive labour requirements, and violations of employees' own service aspirations. Such self-assertion constitutes a practice of 'satisficing' rather than reflecting satisfaction (Walters 2005). As pointed out by Fullin, it is the reinterpretation of encountered constraints and difficulties (informal responsibilities, difficult customers) as positive factors and opportunities to demonstrate competence, which produces employees' relative satisfaction and integration (Fullin 2004). Yet, self-confidence in one's own capacities also can lead to a distancing from disliked labour requirements. It enables holding up one's own service aspirations against the definition given to it by management.

Such a confrontation appears to be important in defining one's own service attitude not only as a character trait or competence, but also as one's own value, or as a professional or personal ethic and 'feeling rule' as Bolton and Boyd put it (Bolton/Boyd 2003). The next

quote from a 33-year-old sales clerk in firm D is an example of this. She has been working at the same shop for five years and currently has a permanent part-time contract.

*Stefania: What I think is that this is precisely what providing good service, doing good work means: Selling only what the customers really want to buy and selling good products. This is how I understand my work. But this is not how things work here. Here, the only important thing is to increase turnover. (...) This is also a department (trekking and climbing) where people have quite a lot of questions. They ask you something and you spend lots of time talking to them. In fact, I spend my days chatting with customers, and that's a nice way of spending work time. If I can, I chat a lot with customers. Also, then I need to spend less time filling up the shelves, that's so boring (Stefania /permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm D).*

For Stefania, creating her own criteria for providing good service becomes a way of appropriating work time and escaping disliked work tasks. However, turning back to the interview with Eric, the following passage from his interview shows how affirming his service knowledge might induce a rejection of unlimited responsibility requirements as well as an internalisation of the management imperative that 'the customer is king'. Such internalisation occurs despite the recognising management's strategies of cost reduction and degrading service conditions.

*Eric: No, no, I'm satisfied if I see a customer leaving the shop satisfied. But, this depends on the situation in the whole shop, from when he enters, how he sees the shop, that it isn't dirty, whether he finds all the things he needs or half of the shelves are empty. (...) One says, when I'm at work, I have to forget about my private thoughts, I shouldn't bring them to work. But, in reality, how do you do this? If I have some preoccupation in the head, unfortunately, I have it there also during work. And if then, maybe you make an unfriendly face to a customer and he gets angry. It shouldn't be that way. Someone who does a certain kind of work, this person is also responsible, should understand certain things. We live thanks to the customers. And if people don't come here to do their shopping anymore, we are the first to go to the dogs. Because, with this air that is blowing right now, to put single supermarkets into franchising, those with less turnover will be the first to be transferred into a franchise (Eric/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

It can be seen how effective responsabilisation for firm interests functions through both employees' dependence on the firm's well-being and their intrinsic interest in self-responsibility and recognition (as already indicated in the interview with Elena regarding the claim for responsibility as a character trait). Fear of further precarisation (through franchising)

together with the integration of management's rhetoric of service quality and the 'customer is king' mantra into one's own concepts of good work produce and reflect an intrinsically motivated internalisation, but also a simultaneous appropriation of responsibility. In contrast to Bolton and Boyd's results in their study on flight attendants, the confrontation with difficult customers and limited margins for customer service does not lead to 'empty' emotional performance (as a possible form of resistance and limiting of labour performance) but to claims for providing a good service nonetheless (Bolton/Boyd 2003). This appropriation is combined with internalising an economic necessity: Franchising is presented as a given, unchangeable trend, resulting from both a necessary economic rationality and specific management interests. Moreover, appropriation comes along without a clear opposition between the management's and one's own service values. Consequently, it seems to contribute to a balancing of contradictions in management's strategies rather than to developing resistance capacities against labour requirements. While rejecting full responsibility for customer satisfaction can be read as an implicit call for better service conditions, such a claim is not voiced explicitly. Nor does the employee reveal any (practical) attempts to reject management's requests regarding the required service attitudes.

The next quote further traces how practices of appropriating meaning through personalisation might foster a transfer of conflicts into the private sphere as Elena's last quote suggested. For this purpose, employees' perception of their own decision powers in front of management's availability requests is revisited. Appropriation and personalisation here concern claims for one's choice about the extent of availability demonstrations, as based on one's own labour performance, acquired merits, and (informal) status in the workplace hierarchy.

*Elena: I lived that period of initial temporary employment contracts very well. The only negative thing was the hours we did. I was employed for 24 hours, but effectively we did more than 40 hours per week, with overtime included. Because that was during the Christmas time, there was more overtime requested from seasonal employees than from the permanent staff. I had been looking for a part-time employment, because having a family this was what most fitted my needs. Well, as I enjoyed working there, I did the sacrifice, I sent my son to the grandparents, and then I did all these overtime hours. And then I got a permanent contract. It was for this reason that I did it, to get a permanent contract later (Elena /permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C2).*

The interviewee clearly points to a 'sacrifice' she did in order to obtain a permanent contract. Using this term, acceptance of frequent overtime hours is presented as her own decision. It



appears as motivated by her own interests, but also requires respect or a pay-off for the difficulties, namely having to leave her son with the grandparents. Though the word 'sacrifice' might allude to some external force and necessity, and though the interviewee holds that her aspired permanent employment could only be obtained through the 'voluntary' sacrifice, she does not refer to any blackmailing pressures. By stressing her own choice while omitting external pressures, a perception of her acting and decision powers is maintained. On this basis, it is even possible to claim giving priority to one's private life (and not to work), and to accept overtime only when there are no personal obligations affected - though, this priority is clearly limited by the 'sacrifice' just described. This notwithstanding, obtaining a stable employment position is of course equally motivated by life and family interests.

This perception of one's own decision power is based not only on a pronounced practice of individual availability demonstrations, but also on a certain pride of given availability and endurance of hard work conditions. The same interviewee, right after complaining about very tiring and stressful work conditions at the cash desks (resulting from under-staffing), continuously insisting in the fact that she has never asked for any extra breaks despite being tired and clearly rejects the idea of developing strategies of personal strike, alleviation and rejection of the high work load.

The different passages quoted from this interview reveal how problems are transferred and left to be solved in the private sphere. In the above quoted passage, this happened with stress accumulated during work. Here it concerns relying on grandparents to help care for the interviewee's child. As a mental coping practice, this externalisation of conflict solutions into the private sphere might function as further proof of one's 'autonomous' action potential. Yet, it also produces a submission of 'private' needs and interests under labour requirements and contributes to reducing the importance given to these private interests - thus further reducing the claimed choice and priority for one's private life. Consequently, this interviewee denies problems arising from flexible work times by assuring that her son does not need constant care anymore: Just as if her interests in private and family life would be reduced to fulfilling her reproductive care duties.

A similar reduction of possible private or family interests is expressed by another employee who declares that frequent weekend shifts would be no problem for her because her children would by now be used to her absence. Finally, reducing the relevance of one's own interests, which are in conflict with labour requirements, does not only concern family, but any kind of personal interests. The following example suggests that personal interests exceeding the basic necessity of assuring one's income are 'stupid', not really valuable concerns. This interviewee

is a 30-year-old temporary part-time sales clerk working at firm D for about one and a half years with a two-year break in between.

*Laura: But, I think, if they should take me in on a stable basis, it's going to be with a part-time contract, they already told me this. In that case, me too, for the moment, I would have to search for something, to do also something else. Because, I live alone, I have to maintain myself somehow. But, in my opinion, anyway, that's the way, it's not going to be easy with our flexible shifts, it's not easy to organise yourself. And not only for a second job, then, but also all the stupid things you want to do. Like, let's say you want to sign up for some kind of course, some sports or computer skills or anything, during the week, that's not really possible, well such stupid things like these (Laura/ temporary part-time contract, salesclerk, firm D).*

### 8.2.2 Border drawing between the firm and the self: rejecting indirect control and subjectification

So far, the importance of practices of personalisation for developing capacities of border drawing and limiting emotional labour requests has been discussed. On this backdrop, practices of rejecting requirements of flexibility, availability, and subjectification are now analysed in more detail. This is done in two steps. In a first instance, this section considers the rejection of management's indirect control strategies. Rejection of labour requirements and direct control are then addressed in the following section. Important aspects of border drawing practices between one's subjectivity and the firm that are addressed here include: (a) disguising and rejecting fake participatory offers, (b) a clear border drawing between work and private life, (c) referring to work ethic and fair exchange, (d) reinterpreting participatory obligations as a game, and (e) appropriating such participatory management strategies for own concerns, be this for demands regarding work conditions or for the improvement of personal relations among colleagues.

The first basis on which management's normative control strategies are rejected is upon recognising them as false promises, thus rendering explicit the above described conflict of lacking participation. As described in chapter seven, employees are largely conscious of the fake character of participation offers. They voice this as a central conflict in their everyday experiences. These experiences of falseness give rise to demands for greater effective margins for autonomy and participation. They also foster disinterest and limited enthusiasm for firm culture and responsabilising management initiatives. Such disinterest is frequently expressed

across the interviews. Sometimes, such verbalised disinterest is combined with actually avoiding participation and with a limited identification with the firm. This occurs even where employees express a desire for greater involvement and participation. Disinterest and limited participation in management's initiatives, thus, immediately appear as ambiguous coping practices. Employees respond by withdrawing and rejecting unsatisfactory requirements (of superficial participation and identification), but also show a resignation and renouncement of their own intrinsic interests and aspirations in work.<sup>227</sup> The following quote is a good example for both of these aspects:

*Int: What do you think about these social events, firm dinners, trips...?*

*Laura: Up to now, I couldn't participate. It's a pity, but seasonal staff is not considered there. (...) There is not really much involvement. There could be lots more. There isn't even any real job training. (...) Well, for now I don't really feel responsible for the firm, for any economic results or stuff, I really don't care. But if they would keep me, sooner or later, with a permanent contract, I mean. Yes, I really hope so, even if it's going to be difficult. And then I also could participate much more and take more responsibility, finally. But for now it all seems like a rather difficult situation.*

*Stefania: Obviously, I didn't participate! This is my work. For leisure activities I have my own life. I don't want to be part of any firm family here. (...) For me, personally, I don't live these things as a pressure. I don't want to get anywhere here, it's just a job. (...) I don't want to work full-time either, absolutely not. Not even more part-time hours, no. This way, part-time, I am able to do other things, too. Other jobs, too; but more interesting, autonomous ones. And above all having time for my life, to live, to go to the mountains, having days off for these things also during the week*

*(Laura/temporary part-time contract, salesclerk, firm D; Stefania/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm D).*

Stefania here expresses relative satisfaction with her current part-time employment status. The part-time income is not considered as a major problem by her as she still lives with her mother and has some secondary income as a sports trainer. Such relative satisfaction is not least based on a practice of border drawing between work and personal life. Self-realisation, for Stefania, appears to be clearly confined to private life (or to other, autonomous forms of work). Such border drawing sustains mental distancing from and practical rejection of management's normative control strategies. For her colleague Laura, transition expectations (despite her mentioned aspiration in future permanent full-time employment in firm D) seem

---

<sup>227</sup> A complementary reduction of importance given to one's own interests was encountered by Fullin regarding the progressive adaptation of employees' expectations in employment stability and life course planning to the conditions of available precarious contracts (Fullin 2004).

to have a similar distancing function. Yet, in her case, the perceived frustration with the current situation remains, both in terms of her current employment position and the limited opportunities for participating in the labour process. This is because she does not develop such a strong border drawing between work and life as her colleague and maintains aspirations in work instead. Obviously, they both speak from different positions: Stefania has a permanent and Laura only a temporary contract. When asked elsewhere in the interview where she wants to be in ten years, Stefania also expressed an interest in continuing to work at D, but only in a higher position, possibly not at the shop floor anymore. In other words, even for this interviewee, border drawing remains an ambiguous practice, possibly closing down one's interests in the current job (as professional growth is linked to demonstrated availability). Border drawing here represents only a restricted resistance practice: Since it results in withdrawing from work instead of attempting to change labour conditions, it still produces only limited action potential.

The interviews speak of further limits of possible border drawing and rejection of corporate identity initiatives: Such practices are confined by employees' intrinsic emotional and social interests in the labour relation - the desire for social relations and integration at the workplace. Additionally, integration is set as a constraint by management control. It reflects the need to avoid marginalisation and exclusion not only in emotional terms, but to reduce blackmailing pressures and achieve favourable workplace positions and relations with superiors. Nonetheless, mental distancing from work (together with the insistence in one's own service values), and the limited identification with the firm that this entails, can serve as a mechanism for developing small daily forms of personal strikes. An example of such an everyday limitation of labour requirements can be seen in Stefania's appropriation of work time to chat with customers.

The next quote again shows how employees draw borders between themselves and the firm or its corporate identity. It pertains to a permanent part-time stock operator from firm I, who is 38-years-old and has worked in the shop for four years.

*Luis: I work every Sunday, also Saturday. Always because, if you don't do Sundays, here they say that you are not with the firm, that you don't have the firm spirit. To me, it's a really disgusting accusation. Of course we are all with the firm! Nobody wants to spit on the plate from which he eats. I love this company because it gives me the money I carry home. I can't not be grateful to this company. But, the fact is that they never ever gave me anything here. (...) I feel bound to this place just as long as I'm here.*

*As long as I'm here, I do my duty as a worker. But, in the future I want to find a different job and then I will leave. (...) During the first years, I still went to these dinners, the fests. But, I've seen that it doesn't help at all, not at all. (...) This firm earns millions of Euros and 70% of its employees do part-time jobs and are precarious, and that's not fair (Luis/permanent part-time contract, stock operator, firm I).*

Here, it is the employees' work ethic in terms of an equal give and take between employer and employee that serves as a resource for border drawing and distancing from normative control through corporate identity and social activities. This is a clear contrast to the above described practices of adaptation, where the idea of a fair exchange was associated with demands for increased participation as responsible firm actors. Now, it induces a criticism of management's corporate identity policies not only as fake ('they never gave me anything here') but also as unnecessary ('of course we are all with the firm'). Identification with the job appears as limited in time. This time similar to the adaptive practices, it is drawn from employee's role as a worker rather than from any corporate spirit. However, also in this case, demanding a fair exchange and identifying with a worker's role requires the internalisation of expected duties. This contributes to sustaining workforce alignment despite the experienced frustration. The next quote also refers to this double effect:

*Marco: And then there are these individual progress interviews. (...) Yes, it's a duty to do them. I talk a lot, I write a lot. But I write things I don't believe in very much. But they want us to do these things and I do it, I play the game. Well, I don't give a damn, at least for two hours I don't work. I talk, talk, and talk and that one just listens to me. And, attention, I also ask my questions! You want to know about me? Ok, I want to know about you! (...) And then, in these interviews, we also occupy time speaking of other things beyond their stupid questions. Anything, any problems and concerns we want to raise. (...) But it disturbs me anyway that they ask me all the time what's up, how are things, what's fine, what's bad. It's getting on my nerves. Every time I have to invent new things. (...) But I don't give a damn shit. I have to play the game, have to obey, have to satisfy them. I can't say 'No, I don't care'.*

*Int: Why not?*

*Marco: Because I don't like it. How can I spit on the plate from which I eat? Because, it's still an instrument of my work, it's still part of my work, it's my duty, I don't see it as anything else. Maybe they want to make it seem something else, but I don't believe in it. (...) No, no, there never are any conflicts regarding these interviews. Maybe because everybody sees it as I do: It's just a duty and nothing else (Marco/permanent full-time contract, stock operator, firm D).*

As already mentioned in chapter seven and above in this chapter (7.2.3, p. 235; 8.1.1, p. 290), this interviewee clearly disguises corporate identity as a management strategy to increase

work motivation. He rejects it as a form of control and intrusion into his subjectivity (but: not with regard to his work load). It is the employees' concept of the labour relation as constituting mutual duties that is at the basis of this conflict perception. Participation is seen as 'only a duty'. It appears as an 'unquestionable duty' that has to be respected. The rule compliance is motivated by his identification with a worker's role, by reinterpreting and appropriating it as his value and a responsible work attitude. By presenting participation and responsibility as a duty, (superficial) alignment to management's requests appears as self-interested realisation of a particular work attitude that requires recognition - and not simply as a form of submission produced by coercion.

The interviewee appears to be torn between pride in his and his colleagues' self-responsible attitude, admiration for the success of management's participatory strategies, and a rejection of these voice opportunities as forms of control and strategic management interests. Beyond ironic recognition of management's control interests and capacities, admiration for participatory offers stems not least from the actually reduced work stress and voice opportunities. It can be seen how this ambiguous attitude reflects the limited action potential that is gained by means of this work ethic: The interviewee is able to distance himself from the normative corporate identity requirements and reduce his effort in the individual performance evaluations by defining them as a game for which he invents answers. But, he cannot openly criticise or refuse participation (joining the game is not a choice), nor completely withdraw mentally from the appeal of participatory offers or enforce better effective possibilities of his voice, leading to real problem solutions and interest realisation. Obviously, the limit here lies not simply in employees' meaning constructions and/or their intrinsic interests in participation, but also in their limited power positions and their exposure to coercion. This interviewee speaks from a rather privileged, less vulnerable position as a permanent, full-time employee with years of experience and a reduced need for professional growth other than wage increases. Finally, a difference exists between Marco and his colleague Alice who demonstrated a similarly ambiguous experience of voice opportunities and has a similar employment status (as permanent fulltime employee). Alice does not develop any practices of border drawing and rejection of participatory requirements. Instead, she remains interested in management's participatory offers, continuously nurtures hope for professional growth, and expresses frustration about disrespect and lacking recognition – without clearly disguising management's control interests behind participatory strategies.

The 'game' metaphor (Burawoy 1979) results as an important element in employees' coping practices. This strategy reduces the importance of constant performance evaluations and takes

them less serious as control strategies. This includes making fun of experienced contradictions and faking one's rule compliance, which is a form of rejection and implicit expression of dissent. In this way, it is also possible to reinterpret the progress evaluation interviews as non-work time. Moreover, the concept of a 'game' produces a sense of one's own control, as one's agency can be presented as strategic action within that game. Finally, performance evaluations are appropriated by using them to talk about one's concerns and to ask questions about superiors. This could be interpreted not simply as a strategy of rejection and evasion, but also a way to enter a negotiation process and to advance one's interests.

There is a further prominent form of not simply withdrawing, but appropriating management's participation offers: Employees reinterpret firm culture initiatives such as dinners, parties or trips as an occasion for having fun with colleagues. They use them to enhance friendships with a limited group of personally chosen colleagues. Rather than reflecting any corporate identity, these friendship groups appear to be based on personal affinity and common private interests. Thus, management's attempts to convey corporate identity are circumvented for private, personal ends. But, group spirit and cooperation might also be enhanced in management's sense by such personal relations - though on a smaller and more indirect scale than that of identification with the firm or the department as a competitive community driven by shared economic success. Employees use this reinterpretation as a way of mental border drawing, rejecting normative control and appropriating the sense of forced forms of participation and subjectification. With its firm culture initiatives, management attempts to blur the boundary between work and private life, pointing to a more efficient integration of employees into the firm (family). Employees try to re-establish this boundary (at least mentally) by giving only private, personal meaning to their participation.

To give some examples, this is how employees present their social relations at the work place and put them in relation to management's idea of a corporate identity:

*Chiara: It is nice to go to these dinners to stay with your colleagues. (...) Well, it was an occasion to stay all together, like a family. (...) But, in fact, you went there to stay with certain colleagues, to have fun with your friends, not so much for the firm. No, really not for the firm (Chiara/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C1).*

*Giuseppe: Yes, yes, we do that, go play cards. Thursdays, we go out to drink together. There are friendships developing here, even love stories. It's normal, this is a social space and necessarily you get in contact. (...) Well, yes, the firm tries to create a group feeling by organising parties, for Christmas, or*

*various dinners with your department. But these things I told you, we do them by ourselves. It's our own initiative, because we are just fine together. (...) But it's something positive that the firm here tries to create a group spirit. It's correct because... Well, I don't know whether they do it because this way it gets more difficult to rebel, or because they really care for it. Because, in the end, it might also be a question of informal relations, creating more friendly relations, so that it becomes more difficult to react in any excessive way. If everybody travels more or less on the same track, there will be more moderation also in case of conflict (Giuseppe/permanent part-time contract, stock operator, firm I).*

As these quotes show, it is employees themselves who create a family spirit based on personal friendships with colleagues. While the corporate interests behind management's cultural initiatives are largely met with disinterest, these initiatives are still welcomed as a form of enhancing social relations and an occasion to strengthen personal friendships. In the second quote, management strategies are described and criticised as a form of conflict channelling. Without explicitly presenting this as a problem, the interviewee names a central contradiction in normative control strategies: both allowing for and exploiting employees' social desires and capacities. On the one hand, personal friendship groups and social activities are seen as something autonomous. They are used as a counterweight to the competition and envy created by a constant striving for one's merit and demonstrating one's availability to the company's requests. On the other, they appear to complement rather than contrast management's corporate identity policy. In sum, border drawing also remains rather limited in this example.

### **8.2.3 Border drawing between one's rights and firm interests: rejecting labour requirements and direct control**

The discussion so far has focussed on employees' practices of border drawing with regard to management's normative, participatory control strategies and their intrusion into a person's subjectivity. Now, employees' attempts to reject concrete work process related labour requirements and to limit one's work performance and availability are examined. Different forms of rejection and personal strike are considered regarding absences from work, opposition to a superior's orders and control, rejecting self-responsibility for continuous training efforts, and reducing one's work load by appropriating work time and breaks or by rejecting additional informal work tasks. A conflictive concept of the labour relation reveals itself as a common cognitive coping pattern sustaining these practices of border drawing and rejection. In contrast to the moral justice expectations sustaining adaptive coping practices,



this understanding refers to a possibly still fair, but conflictive exchange of rights and duties based on struggles over differing interests.

A first form of personal strike, skipping work and pretending to be ill, appears to be hardly common among the employees at hand. Though, this is reported as a widespread practice by shop stewards. There might have been some reluctance to admit such practices within the interviews, as it could reflect negatively on an interviewee's work attitude. Interestingly, massive absences and sick days among colleagues are mentioned when talking about the situation of understaffing – presented as a problem producing an additional work load rather than as a way of rejecting labour requirements. This calls into mind the practice of transferring conflicts onto colleagues. Beyond limited readiness to reveal one's own such practices, this connection might also point to rather limited conflict consciousness and capacities, excluding such 'radical' forms of personal strike from the individual coping repertoire. The explanations given by interviewees themselves, however, centre on a pronounced work ethic and reflecting the expectation to do a good job. Moreover, they state a reduced perception of stress and reduced needs to appropriate additional free time due to already limited part time hours.

A second set of practices concerns the rejection of control measures, superiors' authority and attitudes. Such rejection might remain an only mental practice of cognitive border drawing, such as dreaming of taking revenge against superiors for their constant availability requests, authoritarian, and too ambitious behaviour or other experienced pressures. In the interviews, such dreams comprise conspiring with customers to make them complain about aggressive selling practices, or going to slash the tires of superiors' cars.

Beyond such silent opposition, there are also examples in the interviews of more open criticism of a superior's actions, and for active rejection of their orders and control measures. An example of this is from the only interim worker in the sample, a 30-year-old part-time promoter in firm C2, who has worked for one interim agency in different shops for five years.

*Mimmo: Another form of control is that I'm supposed to write a report for the interim agency on all the things I do within the supermarket, things that don't have to do with promoting the product (of the external company). But never ever would I do this, spying on other colleagues who ask me a favour. For example, maybe there is a colleague alone in the department and he might ask me to sell Nokia cell phones for a moment. Of course I will do it, because for me it's important to have good relations with the workers from the supermarket, because I work here, too. But, I never do anything because a company*

*would impose it on me. I do it for the pleasure to be useful to a working comrade. Anyway, the supermarket doesn't ask me to do other work for them. Once they asked me to work on a Sunday. But I told them that the agency gave me a contract only for Monday, Friday, and Saturday. And then it was finished there (Mimmo/part-time interim worker, promoter, firm C2).*

Rejection of control measures seems to be based on the interviewee's concept of solidarity. This aspiration in solidarity goes beyond the fragmentation of different contract groups. It is motivated by a personal desire to create friendly everyday social relations among colleagues and further a, possibly also instrumental, interest in a cooperative work atmosphere. Interestingly, rejection of requirements comes up where control mechanisms are pointed by the interim agency towards the supermarket as physical workplace rather than to the interim worker himself. Though control here could protect him from additional, non-contractual work load, it is immediately interpreted as a hostile instrument imposed from above against the workers' collective. This interpretation of control is based on a very traditional concept of the enemy reflecting an opposition between employer and employees. This clear friend-enemy image fosters solidarity across the division line of different contracts and employers within one single workplace and potentially enhances collective action potential. Yet, lived solidarity across these division lines ironically supports the supermarket's management strategy of understaffing and flexible hole-filling. Through the backdoor, fragmentation sustains flexibilisation - although not between employees but employment positions. In the last paragraph of the quote, the strategy of border drawing and appropriation of meaning by opposing one's own motivations to management requirements is explicit. Yet, in practical terms, such a rejection of coercion can be expected to be much more difficult to realise than is claimed here. Postulating one's own interests instead of the coercive pressures as the only motivation for one's agency, rhetorically makes these coercive pressures disappear by negating their subjective relevance. However, such a clear construction of oppositions also has its material effects. It might encourage, as in this interviewee's case, actual rejection of labour and control requirements.

A third level of rejection touches upon requirements of self-responsibility:

*Cristian: Currently I don't feel responsible for my work at all, absolutely not. Apart from the fact that I'm really against consumerism, I have a completely different worldview, even if I do this work in a very consumer oriented place. But, once the stimulus was that you could decide yourself to take x products of this and that brand and try to sell them. Now, this doesn't exist any longer. Goods simply arrive in a*

*given number. And how can you feel part of a process, if everything arrives without your involvement and you only have to sell it? (...) It's also difficult to do a good service, especially as there is a lack of training. I have been in a department that sells computer and cell phones for six years now. But I never did any course. Either I study about the technological progress on my own or I don't sell anything anymore. Once I did this. But now no, honestly no. There is no more stimulation. And then, also because my main activity now is as a shop steward. I let go a bit of the work down at the shop floor. Both things at the same time are too much (Cristian/permanent full-time contract, salesclerk, firm C2).*

This permanent full-time sales clerk in firm C2 (aged 28, six years in the shop) distances himself from work by rejecting responsibility for work results and reducing his training efforts. This is motivated by a double set of factors. It results from frustration with the above described dequalification and centralisation of work processes, and it is sustained by giving an alternative sense to work and society: by engaging in union activity and acquiring collective capacities, and by holding an anti-consumerist habitus, which is opposed to the work environment. This alternative sense compensates for the frustrations experienced in terms of autonomy and active agency, responsibility and involvement, good service and meaning. It allows for a withdrawal from the work content and process itself.

Finally, rejecting labour requirements concerns work load and time. More specifically, effective work time and labour performances are reduced by appropriating additional breaks.

*André: Me, yes, I take my breaks. (...) It's not about seeing that there is no work, but if you want to smoke your cigarette, you go smoke a cigarette. And I also go to the toilet twice in the morning. I'm slim, do you really think I go twice to toilet during the morning? But if you want, I also bring a medical certificate, there's no problem. Besides, they know very well. I'm made like that. Two of our superiors go twice a day to toilet, I go twice a day. Then, there are also those days when there's really a lot to do and I want to go away early. Then I don't even stop for smoking, I stay there and work. We manage ourselves. I stop, talk to colleagues. Come on, at least this. There is this and that to be done? I do it, I also do what is not in my qualifications, ok, no problem. But, don't get on my nerves! Leave me in peace! (André/permanent part-time contract, salesclerk, firm G)*

A strong sense of justice for taking additional, autonomously decided breaks is reflected by this passage. It is achieved by naturalising references to the personal character, but also to (pretended) personal needs. Personalisation is used here tactically for claiming one's rights. Immediately afterwards, legitimacy is drawn from comparison with his supervisor's behaviour and a demand for equal rights. In the end, managing one's own breaks is a

minimum right the interviewee insists on, all the more as an exchange for extra labour performance and availability given. Thus, not only personalisation but also the idea of a fair exchange is present again in this meaning construction.

There is also an element of solidarity in the appropriation of breaks. Interviewees from firm G report about a frequent practice of substituting each other informally at the cash desks in case one of them does not feel well or simply needs a break for smoking or for going to the toilet. In this way, they do not have to wait until such mini-breaks are officially approved by superiors. Such solidarity practices help to moderate hard work conditions, strict control, and immobility associated with the cash desks. Yet, as previously suggested, this solidarity has ambiguous results. It also contributes to a smoother functioning of management's strategy of flexible exploitation and minimum staff numbers. Officially, every cashier has his/her own code for the cash desk to ascertain who is responsible for the money (and any deficits) at any given moment. Consequently, in theory, cashiers would have to be officially substituted and codes changed, or another desk would need to be opened by the substituting colleague, even only for a short toilet break. Often, this practice is not respected by management either, as it would require additional time. In contrast to the above quoted interim worker, employees here are conscious of this contradiction. They themselves explicitly raise this positive effect of informal mutual substitution for management as a problem – without however negating the value of or refraining from such solidarity. Instead, they clearly give the fault to management's strategies. In other words, they display an analytical capacity to recognise structural reasons for their conflict experiences. An analytical capacity, however, that alone does not help them to resolve experienced contradictions. Despite the lived everyday shop floor solidarity, they lack the collective power to impose a change in work conditions against management's interest. Apparently, this kind of work process related solidarity has limited effects in producing action potential - all the more in a context of management strategies aiming at cost-reduction and self-regulation. These practices of mutual substitution don't interrupt the work flow and the service process. Instead, they take place only on an informal, semi-hidden level, actually contributing to the reproduction of an individual's labour power and sustaining their capacities of endurance in the face of stressful work conditions.<sup>228</sup>

A further, less problematic example of daily solidarity in the self-management and appropriation of break times can be found in the following passage. It is taken from an

---

<sup>228</sup> A more forceful alternative would be an open collective struggle for additional breaks, developing forms of rejection or strike that manage to block the labour process. Yet, as is shown later on, respective collective capacities are limited – not least also due to shop floor solidarity being limited to personal friendship bonds.

interview with a permanent part-time cashier aged 31, who has been working at firm D for four years. Here, solidarity does not consist of substituting colleagues during their breaks, but in covering informal, self-determined breaks in front of superiors:

*Valentina: What I don't like about my work? I don't know precisely. I like a bit of everything about it, regarding the type of work. But inside of this work there are a lot of things that I don't like. They don't accept the minimum rights of a worker. You can't breathe any freedom as a worker. (...) To give an example, let's take the afternoon break. Recently, the director decided that he doesn't want to see anybody taking a break after 5 p.m. anymore. What's that? Me, now I go all the more taking a break after 5 p.m. (...) Colleagues have to inform me of who else is at the reception desk when they take a break to smoke a cigarette for two minutes. (...) Obviously, I won't tell if somebody takes a break after 5 p.m. On the contrary. For example, if superiors search for a person or want somebody to come somewhere to do some specific task, well it's us in the reception who have to call that person over the loudspeakers. Well, if I know that somebody is on break, I won't call him immediately, or wait for the second call. Because then, if that person doesn't show up immediately, everybody would know that he or she has been taking a break. (...) The problem is that everybody is afraid. So, nobody goes for a break anymore in the afternoon. Really, fear. That is what disturbs me, this work atmosphere. Well, me, I challenge them. Always correctly, however. I don't challenge them when there is a queue at my cash desk. But, if I want to smoke a cigarette at 5.50 p.m., I do it without giving myself any problems. You need times for a break, we are on our feet all day long (Valentina/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm D).*

Based on her own privileged workplace position and role, this employee is able to hide colleagues' informal breaks from superiors' eyes. She claims to explicitly disregard the prohibition of taking afternoon breaks as an expression of dissent. Both, solidarity and her own opposition constitute not only a way to limit the exploitation of her own labour power. Above all, she is motivated by an opposition to the authoritarian workplace regime experienced. The latter is presented as profoundly unjust. For, it neither respects employees' self-responsible work attitudes their desires for autonomy, nor what is perceived as a worker's minimum rights. Again, the notion of a fair exchange is an important element in sustaining practices of rejecting labour requirements or workplace rules: As in the case of adaptive practices, claims for recognition of employees' autonomy are justified by their good and self-responsible work performance. Their own capacities of rejecting and challenging workplace rules are based on such correct performance. The desire for a non-authoritarian work atmosphere, autonomy, and respect for personal and physical needs are considered here to be part of workers' minimum rights. The latter are presented as a given, unquestionable, uncircumventable fact. Their violation is the principle, original reason for dissatisfaction with

work conditions. As argued above, this is all the more the case as this violation concerns previously obtained margins of autonomy. On this backdrop, further on in the interview, criticism again draws from the unequal treatment of staff and superiors. It is enforced by presenting management's practices as both arbitrary, i.e. without a 'just' foundation, and economically inefficient (as reducing employees' productivity). Once again, this is an example for how employees appropriate economic rationality for justifying their own dissent. The insistence on workers' rights points to an important difference in the concepts of a fair exchange that serves here as a tool for border drawing and rejection of labour requirements, and those analysed above as sustaining adaptation and endurance of disliked work conditions. Now, employees do not take management's requests as a given, legitimate side of a fair exchange that would require fulfilment as a worker's duty. Instead, consciousness of one's rights allows for limiting what is to be considered as justified (rather than as 'just') requirements and one's 'correct' performance. Here are two examples:

*Cristian: Work for money, that's the exchange. You can't ignore this just because you're on a permanent contract now. Still, the firm has to be kept running. (...)*

*Int: You mean because it's in your own interest?*

*Cristian: In my opinion, this is a moral question. (...) Always assuming that the work conditions allow for it. Because if these conditions don't allow me to give... (...) The problem is this: A worker is motivated if the firm motivates him. If the firm isn't interested in motivating the worker, not only in economic terms, but also on a moral level, if you think that people are like robots, if your only preoccupation is to reduce labour costs... The conditions in which we do our work here are really bad. Logically also my productivity is really low (Cristian/permanent full-time contract, salesclerk, firm C2).*

*Valentina: I feel responsible for a lot of things at work. For example, I also do some training for colleagues at the computer or with the newcomers. Or, I also take a look on the curriculum vitae for the selection process of new staff. This has absolutely nothing to do with my official work tasks. This spring, we arrived at a point where I told them that I wouldn't do these things any more. Because I got a new supervisor. With the old one, I got along quite well. I could even ask for the work times I preferred. The new one didn't care at all about us employees. So, a new equilibrium was established: The firm doesn't give me what I'm up to, well then, I don't give it either. (...) Now there is a new supervisor again. But, now we arrived at a compromise. The thing is that me neither, I don't feel satisfied with my work as a cashier. To do something more interesting, you too, you have to give something. If I take all these extra responsibilities, it's comfortable for the firm, sure. But I have an interest in it, too (Valentina/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm D).*

As can be seen from these quotes, conflicts are interpreted here not only as a question of lacking recognition of fulfilled workers' duties in the form of given availability and rule compliance. Instead, employees here claim their own rights as independent, or even opposed to management's requests and their fulfilment. They question given labour requirements by confronting them with actual work conditions and their own aspirations. Consequently, those requirements that are perceived as violating their rights and aspirations are rejected. Beyond claiming recognition for their good performance and self-responsible work attitudes as a sign of fulfilled requirements, they are now more pointedly used to delegitimise these same requirements. In this, the labour relation might be still seen as an exchange of mutual rights and duties. But, the decisive difference is that the terms of trade of such a 'give and take' are not taken as a given moral justice standard or as resulting in a natural win-win situation any longer. Instead, arriving at an exchange is seen as a conflictive process characterised by contrasting interests. Recognition of their own rights, rather than of fulfilled duties and merits, thus, appears as requiring a struggle. And, the rejection of non-justified labour requirements is perceived as part of this struggle. It is on the basis of this conflictive understanding of the labour relation that border drawing in these cases can potentially grow beyond a (mental) withdrawal from the firm and the work. Instead, where labour requirements are effectively rejected, this rejection produces a change in work conditions. It actually limits given availability and labour performance. Though, this change remains an ex-post affair, a rejection of given requirements, not an appropriation or shaping of work conditions. As a protection against continuous, subsisting labour requirements, this coping practice requires constant reinvestment of efforts to re-enact rejection and reproduce the established limits.

Yet, despite this difference between concepts of 'fair' and 'conflictive' exchange, reference to the cognitive collective symbol of a conflictive labour relation does not necessarily induce any actual practices of rejection and active struggle. In a majority of cases at hand, it appears to go hand in hand with frustrating experiences of their own limited struggle capacities. In fact, rejection of labour requirements in practice might be paid with an actual renouncement of one's interests. Similar to the moral concept of a fair exchange, voicing conflictive meaning constructions then might serve above all as a mental coping practice of endurance, sustaining employees' own moral integrity, legitimising their own withdrawal and/or reducing identification with work against degrading work experiences and failure:

*Giuseppe: Let's say, there is a group of people who are easy to trace, in the sense that they call you at*

*home, those that are always available for any request, they call you 10 minutes before and you come. But, I'm not part of that category any longer. (...) Well, I did this when I needed these overtime hours. Now, I manage to get along. In fact, I do have quite some extra jobs, I couldn't do this any more with that hyper flexible availability to their requests. (...) You know, I'm here for quite a while now. I don't believe in gaining some more hours anymore anyway. If you see that things don't change after some time, well, either you become depressive and degrade yourself. I don't want that. Because, in the end, I was going in that direction. But then I said no, it's useless. Because then you work in a bad way, against the system. This firm is our reality. If you oppose yourself to this it would really mean to go against the firm philosophy. It doesn't make sense, you would work in a hostile way (Giuseppe/permanent part-time contract, stock operator, firm I).*

For this interviewee, a conflictive concept of 'give and take' (if you don't give me more work hours, I don't give you my availability any longer) goes hand in hand with resignation, withdrawal, and adaptation to given conditions rather than leading to any struggle capacities. Such adaptation is explained by the physical and/or psychological limits of enduring constant confrontation with lacking success. Besides this actual limit of individual action potential, the interviewee stresses his individual choice in accepting or rejecting management's availability requests. At the same time, the relinquishing of his own interest (in full-time employment), which follows from the rejection of such availability requests, is downplayed. Labour requirements are much less explicitly voiced as violations of one's own, unconditioned rights than, for example, by the previously quoted interviewee Valentina. This different insistence on one's own choice versus one's own rights might in part explain and/or reflect stronger resignation and more limited struggle capacities.

The following passage equally speaks of such limited effective action potential, this time despite engaging in active struggle practices. It refers to Eric's above introduced story of failed attempts to obtain a higher pay level as a specialist at the fresh fish counter. (see 8.1.1, p. 288) His engagement in a veritable struggle, including court trial is now addressed.

*Eric: Also with that situation when I was working at the fresh fish counter: The day after I'd lost that court trial (to obtain a higher qualification and pay level) I went to the department head and told her: 'Look, the company doesn't consider me a specialist. A specialist does this and that. A simple sales clerk at the forth pay level does this and that. According to my contract, I'm a sales clerk at the forth level, so I won't do anything else anymore. These extra things I won't do them anymore.*

*Int: Did this work?*

*Eric: Yes, I didn't do the tasks anymore. At the end they got tired of it, they sent me to work at the cash desks. Because, they wanted availability. And I didn't give the availability any more to do the early*



*morning shifts, to prepare the fish counter with all that ice, and to freeze my fingers in this. My fingernails always got lifted up by the cold. (...) To think that I'm at the cash desk now, honestly, yes, it's annoying. But at least you don't have any health problems there (Eric/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

This quote shows how the frustrating experience of a failed struggle is tackled by practices of counterbalancing and 'satisficing', leading to an adaptation of one's own aspirations to given work conditions. Such counterbalancing and withdrawal are realistic practices, given the actual work conditions that the employee faces. But, they are nonetheless an expression of limited action potential within the given power relations at the workplace and beyond, considering the negative result of the court trial. Here, the interview does not give enough information to evaluate the reasons for this failed legal action. In a side-remark, he suspects an undercover agreement between unions and management, but there was no occasion to further inquire into this within the research process.

Despite these limited effects in terms of actually gained action potential, a conflictive understanding of the labour relation constitutes at least a mental basis for potential future acquisition of struggle capacities. It carries work experiences beyond the above described adaptive, passivating, and integrative perception of conflicts as 'disrespect'. These are replaced by the recognition of interest differences as conflict reasons. But, as indicated above, a conflictive understanding of the labour relation and a moral insistence in workers duties do not necessarily exclude each other. The latter can serve as a basis as well as a limitation of the former. Reference to moral patterns of thinking can be found in several of the here quoted passages. It is especially present in the declarations of Cristian (C2, p. 333), but also in Eric's (G) and Marco's (D) adherence to the logic of merit despite their simultaneous insistence in experiences of mobbing or exploitation (see section 8.1).

The following is another example of this combination. Again, it expresses a moralist perception of work. This is voiced by an interviewee who simultaneously develops practices of rejection and border drawing, and expresses a clear opposition between himself and the firm's interests, as could be seen in earlier quotes. This case merits further attention because it reveals a striking self-awareness: The interviewee does not only appear conscious of the limits of such a moralist work ethic, but explicitly names its function as a coping practice.

*Mimmo: For me, doing good work means three things: First, to be present at the workplace, to help out colleagues. Second, kindness, respect and patience in front of the customers. Third, respect for what work is: work is the principle foundation of people's life. With the money that I earn, one day I could build*

*myself a house. So, you should be present at work, be on time, be responsible.*

*Int: But, before you said that with your stipend as it is you could never buy you a house?*

*Mimmo: Yes, right, this makes me a bit angry. Yes, but, you know, this depends also on culture. I've lived ten years with my grandparents on a little farm: sacrifice and work. That's a thing that is passed on in your genes, this nearly religious attitude about work. Often, I've even had little quarrels with my comrades. They would say that I'm not very artistic, that I don't understand certain new kinds of work, that I'm still in the old times. But it helps me, it gives me a sense of practical knowledge, to stick to the concrete. It's useful, to stay calm, to understand what I can spend, what I can do. Otherwise it would be a complete disaster. Now, I really do a kind of life that, well, I have to save money, I don't go out often, no cinema and all that. But, at least I can say that I work, that I'm useful. Because, not working, in our capitalist society, and this in reality is a negative thing, it's nearly as if a person wouldn't exist. Yes, work gives identity, above all a class identity. (...) A worker has to do a good work not only for the wage or the firm, but for himself. To be able to say: Today I also did a good job. But, of course, I only work to live. I don't live for work as so many in my family. Responsibility, yes, but not exaggerated either. Honestly, I only do what I can (Mimmo/part-time interim worker, promoter, firm C2).*

What the interviewee himself presents as a 'nearly religious attitude' towards work sustains endurance of precarious, unsatisfying work conditions. It reflects a need for orientation and appropriating identity positions (Hall 1990, 1997). While identity is claimed here as a 'class identity,' it seems to have more to do with finding and accepting one's place and integrating into society rather than engaging in any antagonist interest struggles (as the equally voiced friend-enemy image would imply): As already hinted at when presenting practices of adaptation, the moral charge of workers' duties reveals the problems and limits of such a work identity. It conditions one's own value and (self)esteem to given labour performances (be this value firm- or self-defined). Consequently, it makes it more difficult to build one's own conflictive coping practices on claims for unconditioned workers' rights.

#### **8.2.4 Appropriation of work conditions: conflictive negotiation**

With the next quote the discussion turns from simple rejection of labour requirements towards practices of conflictive negotiation. This section addresses all those conflictive coping practices by which employees try to obtain better work conditions in direct confrontation with their superiors. Again, the double symbol of a conflictive but fair exchange is at the centre of interviewee's meaning constructions, which sustain and represent this coping practice. As indicated above, the dividing line between practices of rejection and conflictive negotiation is a thin one. Patterns of conflictive negotiation could have already been found in the above

quotes regarding the rejection of additional work tasks (Valentina, firm D) or the appropriation of performance evaluation meetings to raise one's own claims (Marco, firm D). However, in the following, the focus is on employees' attempts to change and shape their work conditions according to their own interests, rather than reducing their own labour performances through withdrawal and/or rejection. In other words, conflictive negotiation is conceptualised here as aiming at enlarged action potential. At least potentially (and in its intention), it points at increasing self-determination and changing conflictive work conditions. As will be demonstrated, enlarged action potential might be produced through effective struggle experiences. It is based on a strong consciousness of one's own rights, struggle necessities, and collective support, but, again, also of individual merits and good work performance. Yet, the actual scope for gaining such action potential and succeeding in such struggles appears as limited due to the restricted individual power positions of employees. These limited struggle outcomes are, nonetheless, often presented as successful compromises by employees. This can be considered as both a strategy to maintain one's own (though restricted) struggle capacities and a practice of satisfying and endurance.

A first example for such conflictive negotiation stems from an interviewee's frustration with forced holiday work. The management refused to pay holiday supplements any longer. Instead, those who did not want to work on an official bank holiday would not be paid at all, just as if one took an unpaid day off.

*Valentina: How I got the 30 hours? Well it all started with a struggle about payment for a bank holiday. They didn't pay it a first time. Afterwards, I fought for it. Really, for me these things were incredible! It's like a basic worker's right.<sup>229</sup> So, I asked for this holiday payment and I threatened to bring in the unions. In fact, I had already asked for support from R to know how to proceed [an external union officer she knows]. Well, as soon as they heard the word union, they paid it. But only to me, to nobody else. (...) Another year later, the department head called me and told me: 'Listen, you shouldn't create these problems. Let's do it this way: You come work and we pay you the holiday supplement. (...) Well, that's why after all these things we arrived at a point, at this little compromise. Because, I work there, somehow I have to stay in there. We arrived at this compromise: I do them the favour that I come to work that day. In this way we avoid the problem. Because, otherwise I stand up to it, and they know this. (...) Well, that's how I arrived at this point with the 30 hours, too. It's been them to ask me to do 30 hours (instead of 20). I didn't really want them in that moment. Well, I accepted, but only on the condition of not*

---

<sup>229</sup> As pointed out by the union officer later on in the discussion, holiday payments are established in the national collective contract. This national contract is also valid for this firm, even though this shop is not unionised itself and doesn't have any collective bargaining at the firm level.

*doing more than six hours per day. That's where I understood that it is all a question of respect. I managed to get this, because I fought. Look, I also do my work well, I always gave myself to work. But I also ask for my rights. I understood that you don't have to be afraid to claim your rights. Because, if you merit something at work you receive it. And because there needs to be respect. Still, there is respect only if you also fight (Valentina/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm D).*

Claiming one's own rights appears here as a strategy to overcome fear, to acquire respect, and negotiation capacities: The successful negotiation of an hour increase accepted only in exchange for regular, maximum daily work times is linked to a history of former struggles and a confrontational attitude towards company requests. This confrontational attitude decisively rests on the interviewee's consciousness of and insistence on her own rights. It is sustained by the latter's enforcement through the unions as a collective actor – though this collective support remains on the level of hypothetical, only threatened intervention (as this is still a non-unionised shop). As indicated above, this consciousness of her own rights increases perceived legitimacy of her claims and facilitates the engagement in this struggle. Entering into effective conflicts with supervisors, and not least experiencing some success in the form of achieved compromises, fosters the interviewee's perception of her own control, action potential, and capacities of negotiating. In other words, negotiation capacities are acquired through the process of negotiating itself, as it contributes to a self-perception as an acting and capable subject. Consequently the own confrontational attitude can be perceived as producing respect rather than marginalisation and negative sanctions from the side of management. Being known as somebody who fights for her rights, seems to change the (perceived) distribution of roles on the 'playing field'. It forces management to recognise and face the employee as an active player with demands – instead of addressing him or her as a passive receiver of labour requirements in the form of orders or unquestionable duties.

However, employee's meaning constructions remain ambiguous: The final passage again demonstrates how the perception of such negotiation capacities is simultaneously bound to the self-image as a good, available worker – thus contradicting the just claimed unconditional character of workers' rights. Moreover, the interviewee displays a strong belief in the actual payoff of acquired merits. This strong justice expectation is in clear contrast to the described conflict experiences, which rise precisely from the non-recognition of claimed merits. It could be argued that, in contrast to the above described practices of adaptation, the belief in justice here does not concern any expected 'natural' payment of merits, but includes and presupposes the fact of fighting for them. However, the result of these struggles is no full recognition of one's own rights, but a compromise, which is also presented as such by the interviewee. This

has also been the case with the same employee's struggle about informal work tasks (8.2.3, p. 333): While the same interviewee talks about rejecting extra work requirements, what is presented as a compromise in the end is only a return to the status quo, with her doing the extra tasks. Rejecting them would have equally meant renouncing her own interests in more interesting work. All through the interview, instead of insisting in the non-fulfilled interests these compromises entail (such as not working on a holiday, having regular maximum daily work times also with less part-time hours, obtaining formal recognition for extra responsibilities), the interviewee underlines the consensual character of conflict outcomes as a necessity to respect the firm's interests, but also as her own achievement. Insisting on an achieved compromise enables her to present herself as both successful in getting her interests respected by the management and also as a responsible firm actor who deserves this respect. Framing struggle results as compromises, thus, appears as a powerful strategy to reinterpret even limited achievements as strengths and successes, thus maintaining a belief in one's negotiation capacities as well as in the usefulness of further struggles. Beyond limited material struggle effects, the just above argumentation points out that such a belief is more than a simple mental illusion sustaining endurance of continuously bad work conditions. Instead, it produces a basis for any actual conflictive action potential, as it allows employees to enter into conflicts and acquire struggle experiences in the first place. This effect becomes clear especially in contrast to the frustration encountered in Giuseppe's rejection practices (8.2.3: 335). Yet, in the end, the acquired action potential also remained limited for Valentina. An individual practice of conflict negotiation cannot challenge the unequal power positions of the overall labour relation. This still limited character is obvious with regard to the uncertain character of obtained concessions and negotiation positions indicated as a source of precarisation. As the interviewee herself states, maintaining her negotiation powers requires constant recreation of personalised social relations and power balances with frequently changing superiors.

Further examples of such conflictive negotiation (attempts) can be found for Giuseppe (I), Mimmo (C2), Eric (G), Luis (I) and Stefania (D). For the first three, negotiation and struggle attempts end in failure. Giuseppe's above mentioned overall frustration with his work conditions also concerns actual negotiation opportunities within firm-given forms of participation and voice. Experienced ineffectiveness of engaging within this framework in negotiations to ameliorate work processes and conditions again causes him to relinquish from his own interests and reject management requests - in this case the attempted employee

involvement in the work organisation. As a consequence of inefficient negotiations about the work organisation and the packing of heavy goods, he decides not to give his opinion and complain about these issues any more.

Mimmo, in turn, reacts to an accusation of not selling enough phones by writing his own statement explaining his reasons and what he considers objective limits of the market, purchasing power, and selling. This can be interpreted as a way of rejecting unjustified criticism and control, but also as a form of struggle and conflictive negotiation trying to have his own standpoint respected – however with little success as his claims are lost in a labyrinth of rejected responsibilities between his employer (the interim agency) and the firm whose phones he sells and who complained about his work results.

For Eric, the above introduced struggle for professional growth can be interpreted as a form of conflictive negotiation. This struggle is led by means of individual availability demonstrations, but also through direct confrontation with superiors<sup>230</sup> and finally an engagement in legal action. It goes beyond a simple rejection of labour requirements, or rather, leads to such a rejection only as a result of failed negotiations and struggles. As seen above, similar to Valentina's attempts to reject holiday work, the result of this struggle is a return to the status quo, with Eric returning to his initial workplace at the cash desks. Again, as demonstrated in the above quote this (actually involuntary) return is presented as a successful resistance strategy rejecting non-recognised extra-tasks. At the same time, it is voiced as a choice for the smaller evil in terms of less (immediately) unhealthy, degrading work conditions. Yet, the insistence on one's own struggle capacities and success is much less pronounced than for Valentina, while simultaneous frustration about a lost fight is more explicit. This argumentative strategy of underlining one's rejection capacities, again, both reflects effective, at least partial such capacities (the interviewee effectively doesn't do any extra tasks any more) and contributes to the production of perceived control and the maintenance of self-esteem and limited action potential.

Luis, similarly to Valentina, reports more exclusively about the success of a negotiation process:

*Luis: I started working at I in January 2002. For two years and a half, I only had a 16-hour contract. Then, I moved to 24 hours. But with six work days per week. In order to get these 24 hours, I had to accept working on six days. Already this is blackmailing. I accepted it, because I needed more money. (...) Last*

---

<sup>230</sup> See also the quote in chapter 7.2.3, p. 234: "But, each time I went to talk with the superiors, with the director, the only reaction was that they slapped the door in front of my nose, even with very hard words. That's what talking face to face with the managers is like." (Eric/permanent fulltime contract, cashier, firm G)

*month, I did a little war with my superiors. I told them: I've signed that contract of 24 hours on six days, but I just can't do it anymore to get up at 4 a.m. six days a week. They nearly did me on the wall, saying that things wouldn't be like that. But, in the end, I got what I wanted: a reduction of one day. Now I do five days and even 28 hours. But these 28 hours, I arrived at these at another time, because I gave them my availability to start working at 5 instead of 6 a.m. Also there, there' been blackmailing on this issue. Actually, the firm has never come towards me. But now, that I did this little fight, now I only do five days (Luis/permanent part-time contract, stock operator, firm I).*

This quote points to the compromising character of achieved negotiation results (24 hours contract for six work days, 28 hours for earlier shifts). In contrast to Valentina, compromising is voiced here as involuntary, based on blackmailing. Obtaining really positive results is presented as the result of a 'war' and a 'fight' rather than of negotiation. This points to a much more confrontational experience of daily work reality, leaving less space for justice aspirations than in Valentina's case: One's own interests have to be enforced against management's will, not through any consensual agreement. Even more crucially than for Valentina, this enforcement builds on collective support from shop stewards, and thus on the availability of collective resources and capacities that can alter the power balance between the management and employees. In fact, in the following the interviewee goes on to claim that he obtained these negotiation results only through the help of the unions, which took over negotiations for him, after his superiors did not listen to him personally.

To conclude, in Stefania's case, we find a similar confidence in her own, individual negotiation capacities as Valentina expressed. Such confidence was visible above with her preference for flexible, informally regulated work times (see 7.1.3, p. 220). It is gained through experiences of successfully insisting on her own interests and confronting superiors with these - concretely speaking of a successful shaping of work times also adhering to her own needs. However, Stefania's case also points to the repeatedly indicated precarious character of informal individual regulations, as they depend on specific superiors and their readiness to negotiate. Consequently, despite apparently successful past negotiation experiences, this interviewee's current action potential remains limited - because a newly arrived superior does not negotiate anymore, but simply fixes work times unilaterally.

### ***8.3 Conclusion: About the social contextualisation of coping practices***

The first part of this conclusion summarises the main features of the coping practices described and highlights their overlapping, non-dualist character. It describes the ‘cumulative’ distribution of coping practices among employees, as well as employee’s active stance in reproducing workplace consent by balancing experienced contradictions with their common sense.

The second part focusses on the social and historical positioning of coping practices. This is referred to on four levels, including the (a) general capitalist configurations of society, (b) specific neoliberal transformations in ideological calls, performance requirements, and their legitimisation, (c) concrete power relations within an individualised, informal regime of labour control, and (d) employees’ socio-structural positions. Moreover, the degree to which employees gain effective action potential is addressed.

#### **8.3.1 Summary: The contradictory character of coping practices and their cumulative distribution**

To begin, a summary of the analysed coping practices is provided, along with a reflection on their relationship to insights and outcomes presented in the literature review.

First, it was shown that adapting to management’s performance requirements is achieved by accepting and internalising the given rules of the game: by demonstrating individual availability and adhering to management’s rhetoric of merit and market necessities. As extensively demonstrated, such adaptation is sustained by conceptualising the labour relation as a ‘fair exchange’ of mutual rights and duties. Adaptation is based on employees’ moral justice expectations, which are held up against contrary everyday experiences. And, it rests on a pronounced consciousness of one’s own good work performance. Together, this generates demands for recognition and participation and helps employees create positive self-representations. Moreover, positive self-representations are maintained by practices of distinction - by marking a difference between oneself and other, more or less available, performing colleagues. Such distinctions are practiced from both sides: By those who strive for maximum availability and integration, as well as by those who try to distance themselves from such requirements.

Second, a broad range of practices to reduce the weight of perceived conflicts has been described. These consist of different ways of transferring, and normalising conflicts. Conflicts are transferred to the future (by means of transition expectations), to the private life (by a



reduced importance given to personal interests that contrast with work requirements and conditions, or by justifying enduring bad work conditions as a necessary sacrifice to satisfy family needs), to third persons (to customers', colleagues' or direct superiors' behaviour and character), or to oneself (for example, when conflicts are digested by 'getting angry only inside'). A powerful, interlinked practice observed is that of personalisation, which attributes conflict reasons to one's personal character and behaviour. In addition, conflicts are normalised and naturalised as economic necessities, as gender-stereotypes, as unavoidable, universal social conditions (for example, the spread of precarious employment conditions and increasing transition periods). Comparison (with other, similar or worse situations) also plays an important role for such normalisation. In other words, analysis of these forms of normalisation, naturalisation and personalisation has drawn attention to the practices by which employees produce unquestionable visions of the world (Schütz 1971), and thus the efforts which are required to maintain the agency routines of an adaptive habitus (Bourdieu 1987) against contrary, contradicting everyday experiences.

Third, appropriating and giving one's own meaning to work seems to be an important coping practice. This consists of the reinterpretation of encountered constraints as one's own choice or of availability requests as recognition for one's demonstrated good performance. Such reinterpretations are crucial for the creation of positive self-representations, as they allow employees to position themselves as active subjects within the labour process and foster pride in their own capacities of enduring hard work conditions and fulfilling performance requirements. In Hall's terms, such appropriation could be understood as an important element in employees' practices of self-positioning and identity construction, by means of dislocating and deferring social meanings. Beyond the issue of availability requests, insistence on one's own good labour performance came up as a central means of appropriating meaning and constructing one's own identity. In this, one's own performance is either attributed to character traits and attitudes or to acquired competencies. This particularly concerns service knowledge, which is understood as a capacity to manage the service interaction. Moreover, employees create alternative sources of recognition of such performance in referring to customer satisfaction.

Fourth, the following practices of border drawing were described: Mental border drawing takes the form of distancing oneself from corporate identity and displaying limited identification with the firm. Such limited commitment is assured by drawing strict borders between work and life as well as by disguising management's participatory rhetoric as fake and false promises. Furthermore, employees' practice forms of daily personal strike. With

regard to corporate identity, they define the different measures of normative and participatory control as a game. This has proved an important practice to create distance between oneself and the firm. In addition, one's own actual participation in the firm community is restricted and appropriated for the creation and fostering of private friendship bonds - perceived as different from official corporate culture and as a way to oppose competition and fragmentation. Practices of rejecting labour requirements and limiting availability and work load included skipping work, having open or hidden objection to superiors' orders, reducing self-responsible training efforts, appropriating additional break times, and rejecting informal additional work tasks.

Finally, some attempts to negotiate one's own rights and interests with superiors in a confrontational manner were discovered. These comprise directly arguing and negotiating with superiors, but also handing in written counter-statements to management's admonitions, or engaging in legal action against the firm.

Thinking back to the coping practices derived from the existing subject-oriented research presented above, significant parallels but also important specifications and differences appear. While the progressive adaptation of expectations was a central category in those researches focussing on employees' reactions to precarious employment positions, here, with respect to the labour process, the continuous striving for achieving better conditions through one's own availability demonstrations seems to be more important. Although such an endeavour proved to be a form of adaptation to given conditions and rules of the game. But, maintaining hope in the future is central for such adaptive coping - and not only with respect to equally important expectations in (passively awaited) future employment transition, but with respect to daily merits to be acquired for achieving growth and better conditions within the same job. However, also in the cases of this research study, expectations are adapted - as just described - by internalising the given rules of the game, or alternatively, as can be seen by the equally high levels of endured frustration about management's false promises.

Second, positive self-representations result as equally important as in the research presented above. Similarly, for such positive self-representations, the reinterpretation of encountered constraints and insistence in one's own knowledge and performance is crucial. Moral concepts appeared as equally important for employees' meaning constructions. In addition, the role played by such moral concepts and justice expectations for the reproduction of self-esteem was further elaborated here. The central importance of aspirations in a fair exchange stands out in this regard. Above all, the ambiguous character of such reinterpretations,

appropriations of meaning, and insistence on moral concepts was demonstrated - not only as ways to sustain self-esteem, but also to legitimise disagreement with and rejection of labour requirements, as well as to foster self-responsibilisation and endurance. Finally, even in the context of highly repetitive retail labour, bad work conditions are compensated by satisfaction with work contents and tasks. Yet, such satisfaction, here, is closely linked with the insistence in one's own good labour performance, in one's own service knowledge and values, and the recognition by customers - and not so much to an interesting work content itself.

Third, as in the literature, conflict reductions appear as important practices. In this case, the ambiguous character of such conflict reductions as both ways to sustain adaptation, but also to appropriate meaning and to distance oneself from work has been put to the fore. This particularly concerns practices of personalisation.

Fourth, given the central relevance of service knowledge for employees' practices to produce positive self-representations, emotional withdrawal from the service interaction resulted as less pronounced in this study than was the case in part of the emotional labour debate. More precisely, both distancing and deep acting appeared as part of employees' service knowledge and their professional values: their (self-described) capacity consists in the ability to manage conflicts by keeping cool and a distance, while offering a good, engaged service. For the latter, taking serious interaction with customers, and respecting them as individuals came out as central. Moreover, also complete emotional withdrawal from social relations with colleagues appeared as the exception. More frequent and important for employees' coping practices was the described personalisation of workplace relations.

Fifth, practices of rejection and negotiation of labour requirements and control appeared as relevant - whereas the presented subject-oriented studies regarding the retail sector seemed to indicate a nearly absolute lack of such capacities. However, also from this study's data, the action potential gained from such practices remains limited - in terms of real opportunities to change given labour conditions and permanently escape the mechanism of forced availability - as will be argued further on. Nonetheless, conflictive practices resulted as an important part of employees' daily coping here.

Having summarised the main coping practices, their distribution across employees is now considered. The central outcome of this analysis is that of a cumulative distribution. First of all, beyond any dualist thinking of submission versus resistance, the differently distinguished practices of adaptation, appropriation, border drawing, and conflictive negotiation overlap, mutually condition, enable, and limit each other. The same single coping practice might serve

multiple more or less conflictive functions, depending on the context and the combination with other practices it is effectuated in.<sup>231</sup> Employees make use of different more or less conflictive coping practices according to the different situations they face. Or, they combine different coping practices in contradictory ways to confront the same problem. It is this mix of different practices, which makes them work as effective coping.

However, not all employees use every type of coping practice. Instead, and this is what is meant by a cumulative distribution, all employees in the sample develop some sort of adaptive practices based on moral integration and combine this with appropriations of meaning. Most of them, in addition, practice different forms of border drawing: either in a limited, only mental way, which goes along with at least partial normative integration; or to a more pronounced degree in combination with strategies of personal strike, actual rejection of labour requirements and/or strong emotional withdrawal from work. Few employees add to these practices of adaptation, appropriation of meaning, and border drawing strategies of conflictive negotiation.

In the following scheme, all of the employees are placed on the ‘highest’ level of cumulative coping practices that they develop – where the attribute ‘highest’ refers to the level of conflictive attitudes and the respective (potential) acting capacities. Placements in the pattern of conflictive negotiation indicate that these employees practice not only such conflictive negotiation, but also use practices of adaptation, appropriation, and border drawing. Whereas interviewees placed in the ‘happy integration’ category limit themselves to adaptation and appropriation of meaning only. The four different categories of ‘happy integration’, ‘mental border drawing’, ‘personal strike’ and ‘conflictive negotiation’, thus, explicitly do not refer to any employee types, but to different forms of coping, which are each meant to synthesise a range of (also contradictory) single coping practices. The titles selected for each category are to be understood as a specification and integration of the patterns of adaptation, appropriation, border drawing, and conflictive negotiation distinguished thus far.

---

<sup>231</sup> Whereas it is possible to detect limited action potential as an effect of adaptive coping practices, part of its meaning constructions can equally inspire practices of border drawing and appropriation. Practices of border drawing and conflictive negotiation, given the lack of actual individual power positions, might well result as alternative ways to produce endurance and ‘satisfying’ appropriations of meaning rather than challenging actual work conditions. In the first case, establishing some mental distance to disliked conflictive work conditions allows for overall integration, adaptation and the balancing of conflicts. In the second case, claiming one’s own merits and duty fulfilment, and hence demonstrating an at least partial internalisation of management requests, provides the basis for border drawing and rejection.

Table 14: Cumulative distribution of employees across coping patterns

happy integration	+ mental border drawing	+ personal strike	+ conflictive negotiation
Chiara Cristina Luca Maria Alice	Daniele Elena Gianni Laura	André Mario Cristian Giuseppe Marco	Eric Mimmo Luis Stefania Valentina
Chiara: permanent part-time, cashier, C1 Cristina: permanent part-time, cashier, C1 Luca: permanent part-time, salesclerk, C1 Maria: temporary part-time, cashier, I Alice: permanent full-time, cashier, D  Daniele: permanent part-time, salesclerk, G Elena: permanent part-time, cashier, C2 Gianni: temporary part-time, salesclerk, I Laura: temporary part-time, salesclerk, D		André: permanent part-time, sales clerk, G Mario: permanent part-time, cashier, G Cristian: permanent full-time, sales clerk, C2 Giuseppe: permanent part-time, stock operator, I Marco: permanent full-time, stock operator; D  Eric: permanent full-time, cashier, G Mimmo: part-time interim worker, promoter, C2 Luis: permanent part-time, stock operator, I Stefania: permanent part-time, salesclerk, D Valentina: permanent part-time, cashier, D	

Every employee's general sense of the labour relation is a central reference for choosing among these different, more or less conflictive coping patterns in the face of concrete work experiences. There are two distinct ways in which employees interpret the labour relation: It is perceived either as characterised by a given win-win situation of fair exchange or as a conflictive arrangement marked by power relations, interest differences and struggles. In Gramscian words, coping practices are framed by employees' worldviews, in this case regarding the labour relation, its moral setting, and/or related interest constellations. That is, daily experienced conflicts are interpreted, given relevance, and dealt with on the basis of specific, work-related aspects of employees' general image of the world.

In the most banal way, criticism and rejection of labour requirements, expected integration and self-regulation, as well as conflictive negotiations about concrete daily work conditions become possible only where interest conflicts are clearly named on the basis of a conflictive understanding of the labour relation. In this, articulating strong conflict experiences depends on at least a certain level of distancing from the work context, and on practices of border

drawing or conflictive negotiation. It presupposes certain capacities of structural analysis and generalisation, allowing employees to disguise such interest conflicts behind management's rhetoric and to attribute them to concrete actors with certain structural positions and institutional roles within the labour relation - and not to personality traits or specific, seemingly individual problems and positions.<sup>232</sup>

Instead, coping practices tend towards adaptation, internalisation, and endurance of persisting problems where different interests remain covered by a moral and universalist concept of 'fair exchange.' The latter is combined with claims for recognition and participation, which are positioned within an unquestioned frame of given labour requirements and only conditional workers' rights. Adaptation, thus, passes through a partial, though mostly rhetorical integration of intrinsic employee interests into management's control strategies. Above all, it is produced by the described 'satisficing' appropriations of meaning. Given the context of structural vulnerability and precarisation, frustrating experiences and violations of employees' aspirations in participation and recognition at least implicitly rise from all employees' stories. Attributing limited relevance to these experiences and potential conflicts can be considered an effect of successful, active practices of integration and persistently effectuated by employees themselves - against contrary daily experiences of forced availability, fake participation offers, and frustration.

Consequently, strong intersections appear with regard to the different degree of conflict experiences detected in chapter seven, and the cumulative distribution of coping patterns described here. Not surprisingly, those employees confined to adaptive coping practices of rule internalisation, individual availability demonstrations, and 'satisficing' appropriations of meaning, possibly combined with limited forms of border drawing, are those who conceive only limited conflict pressures. This concerns the young recent employees in firm I, the 'in-group' of well integrated employees in C1 and part of the interviewees from firm D. Strong border drawing and conflictive attitudes of negotiation are practiced by those employees who perceive everyday conflicts in an encompassing way, as touching upon both issues of participation and the degree and form of labour requirements and exploitation. Strong border drawing and conflictive negotiation are found among employees in firms G and C2, for the older staff in I, and also for the other part of interviewees from D.<sup>233</sup> Recalling the cumulative

---

<sup>232</sup> For this argument, also see Ferreras (2007). Compellingly, she describes retail cashiers' difficulties to perceive of a concrete counterpart for their complaints as well as a lack of capacities to abstract from individual experiences. I return to this latter aspect in the following chapter on employees' collective coping practices.

<sup>233</sup> This latter case of employees in firm D especially stresses the high relevance of a more or less moral or conflictive general understanding of labour relations. Similarly strong conflict experiences regarding management's fake participation offers, for some employees, translate into practices of negotiation and rejection,

distribution of coping patterns, these employees, along with their conflictive understanding of the labour relation, also refer to concepts of fair exchange in other situations and to different extents. Their common sense, thus, appears as full of contradictions.

*Table 15: Combinations of conflict experiences and individual coping patterns*

	<b>Happy integration</b>	<b>+ Mental border drawing</b>	<b>+ Personal strike</b>	<b>+ Conflictive negotiation</b>
<b>Limited conflicts in everyday work experiences</b>	Chiara/C1 Cristina/C1 Luca/C1 Maria/I	Gianni/I		
<b>Work experiences as conflictive in terms of participation</b>	Alice/D	Laura/D	Marco/D	Stefania/D
<b>Work experiences conflictive in terms of participation and/or direct control and forced availability</b>		Daniele/G Elena/C2	André/G Mario/G Cristian/C2 Giuseppe/I	Eric/G Mimmo/C2 Luis/I Valentina/D

Besides these differences in employees' worldviews regarding the conflictive or harmonious character of the labour relation, a further central outcome is that aspirations in participation, recognition, and one's own control are highly relevant not only for all employees' conflict experiences, but also for all forms of coping. They sustain the appropriation of meanings, and thus, the production and maintenance of positive self-representations necessary for all forms of coping - be this as compensation for bad conditions endured or as a basis for conflictive attitudes. A central part of this appears to be employees' self-positioning as available, self-responsible, and recognised (or recognition meriting) firm actors.

It is precisely because of this intrinsic interest in participation that management discourses of empowerment, individual voice, and corporate identity can gain relevance in the first place far beyond the segment of well-established, successfully integrated and self-managing so-called

---

which render differing interests explicit. While for others in the same context, such conflict experiences are channelled by adaptive practices claiming moral justice, recognition, and better opportunities of participation and integration.

‘knowledge workers’ – be it in an affirmative or critical sense.<sup>234</sup> In fact, the analysis here points to employees’ active stance in producing workplace consent. The important point to stress here is that the contradictory character and mix of coping practices plays an important role in this. It reflects employees’ capacities of balancing contradictions.<sup>235</sup> By means of the meaning constructions employees tolerate, downscale, and/or reconcile conflicts between different work requirements (such as efficiency versus service quality) and/or between a firm’s flexibility requests and one’s own interests and needs.<sup>236</sup> More precisely, only through these coping practices, participatory, normative, and responsabilising management strategies of subjectification can function in the above indicated way as effective means of flexibility regulation and interest integration - also against contrary everyday experiences. As a result, these management strategies come to constitute an illusionary but still accepted acting frame in spite of their own conflictive character.

Thus, management control and workforce alignment are reproduced and stabilised through employees’ own agency. But, the achieved workplace consent appears as (potentially) brittle, itself a rather precarious affair. It depends on exactly these employee performances of conflict channelling - while the original conflict reasons stay alive underground. In other words, apparent workplace consent does not necessarily imply any absence of conflicts, but points to

---

<sup>234</sup> As Kratzer puts it, in order to understand, why employees consent to the given labour requirements, it is “increasingly necessary to take into account (their) subjective interests, orientations, perceptions and strategies.” (Kratzer 2003: 243; translation K.C.) Dörre develops a similar argument for what he calls ‘creative precarious’ workers (namely artists and researchers). Their practices of self-positioning within a model of successful ‘unconventional integration’ – through flexible forms of (self-)employment and lifestyle choices, in contrast to Fordist ‘standard’ employment - result as part of necessary coping practices to maintain action potential in a context of continuous experiences of high instability and vulnerability (Dörre 2009: 50ff). Regarding Dörre’s empirical studies, creative precarious workers strongly cling to the neo-liberal message of liberating powers entailed in flexible forms of employment to achieve such self-positioning. My analysis demonstrates how the idea of being a self-responsible firm-actor (instead of the idea of liberating flexible employment in Dörre’s cases) motivates both consent to management’s requests for participation, commitment, and availability as well as struggles over the latter’s terms and conditions. This is the case here not only for so-called ‘knowledge work’ (be it precarious or not) but also in a context of low qualified standardised front-line service labour.

<sup>235</sup> To recall just one important example, reference can be made to employees’ claims for their service knowledge. Conflicts resulting from insufficient resources for what employees consider good service interactions are balanced by insisting in their own capacities of handling conflicts with customers. Such cognitive coping constitutes an important appropriation of meaning that sustains their own action potential in a conflictive, frustrating situation. However, such claims equally contribute to the maintenance of workplace consent as well as company performances (in a situation in which pressures of cost reduction put at risk service quality) - without actually obtaining better conditions for service interactions. These empirical findings reinforce the above criticism of the current emotional labour debate as offering a too dualist vision of employees’ agency - as it consequently struggles to assess the ambiguous role played by emotional labour for such balancing of contradictions and for producing concrete but limited action potential.

<sup>236</sup> If self-exploitation is no central conflict in the interviews (as indicated above in chapter 7.3.2), this is not only a sign for an uncovering of the real terms of power and control by employees, but might also hint at their powerful coping practices of un-naming conflicts. As Böhle underlines, “also the rejection of burdens has become a new performance requirement which subjects have to face.” (Böhle 2010: 469-470; translation K.C.) Such rejection can be effectuated by such coping practices as border drawing and personal strike, or by reducing the perceived relevance of such burdens, and thus by un-naming the respective conflicts.



employees' effective coping practices.<sup>237</sup> With these coping practices employees face the social requirements of acting and thinking they encounter in their everyday work life. As the balancing of conflicts, and the integration of intrinsic interests into this balancing show, such coping represents no simple, linear internalisation social requirements. Instead, it constitutes ambiguous and fragmented practices of self-constitution and identitarian positioning (Foucault 1989, 2006, Hall 1990, 1997) within contradictory, power structured social relations which always provide for both agency opportunities and restrictions. This socially grounded character of coping will be discussed in the following section.

### 8.3.2 Contextualisation 1: The socially grounded character of coping practices in capitalist society

The open question that remains regarding the stabilisation of (potentially brittle) workplace consent is why employees' stick to such conflict balancing coping practices. The following section tries to give an answer to this question by placing employees' coping practices within their larger social context - and to step back from the analysis of individual behaviour and any possible psychological interpretation of the latter. Conceptualising employees' agency and their meaning constructions as coping practices means understanding them as products of social reality or as a result of subjects' confrontation with this reality. The contextualisation will be undertaken in four steps, following a recall of theoretical concepts and motivations. First, reference is made to the general conditions of capitalist society and the requirements of acting and thinking it generates. Second and third, the specific configuration of ideological calls as well as practical agency conditions and power relations emerging from current neoliberal hegemony and respective Post-Fordist workplace regimes are addressed. Finally, the relevance of employees' socio-structural positioning is sketched out.

As an example, this contextualisation focusses on one coping practice only: the concept of fair exchange. This concept of fair exchange as a cognitive coping practice was chosen, because it emerges so predominantly from the empirical investigation, and because it results so central for the, actually limited, degree of confrontation in employees' coping practices and their lacking respective action potential and conflict handling.

---

<sup>237</sup> In chapter seven, such a brittle character of labour control was derived from the conflictive character of participation and the respective re-emergence of the transformation problem within a context of subjectification. This chapter showed that employees (at least partially) manage to neutralise this conflict with their own coping practices.

First of all, it should be stated clearly that, despite all subsequent criticism, the belief in a fair exchange and corresponding aspirations in recognition and participation should not be misunderstood as a sign for employees being blindly fooled by management's strategies. Employees' moral, personalised, and individualised perceptions of social reality could indeed be considered as expressions of a 'false consciousness' - in the sense that they give a mistaken idea of objective power relations and structures. However, they are far from false in the sense of wrong or foolish with respect to employees' everyday experiences and their immediate need to deal with given work conditions. Instead, as demonstrated, such meaning constructions serve as effective coping practices. Through them, employees render themselves capable of acting in the face of their work and living conditions. These meaning constructions enable them to endure a precarious daily work life - but also to give meaning to it, and in so doing, to defend, claim, and construct their own subjectivity.<sup>238</sup> Hence, the above described balancing of contradictions does not simply represent any passive endurance or submission - even though it reproduces workplace consent and has limited results in terms of conflict solving. In contrast, it is part and parcel of such a striving for necessary action potential - even if it is limited to acting within a given unchanged conflictive frame.

Recapitulating the above theoretical reflections, the socially grounded character of the described coping practices can be summarised as follows: Differences in employees' concepts of the labour relation can be interpreted as subjective choices between different socially available meaning constructions (Schütz 1971). As 'true' products of social reality, these depend on an individual's history, their former experiences with this reality, as well as their accumulated knowledge, cognitive repertoire, and habitus. This individual experience is influenced by people's different, multiple social positions and the available, formal, and informal resources of thinking and acting related to these positions in terms of economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1987a). Beyond such individuals' social positioning, the subjective importance given to one or the other socially available meaning is related to the concrete requirements of acting and thinking generated by a specific historical formation of society and each specific agency situation (Holzkamp 1985; Krauss 1996a). It is these requirements that subjects have to face with their common sense to gain any action potential within this context. That is, a subject's common sense is influenced by the overall social relations of hegemony, the respective power relations, interest struggles, and ideological calls.

---

<sup>238</sup> Even the concept of a 'psychological contract' as representing aspired mutual duties entails such flawed perceptions of social reality. Yet, as a psychological concept it is useful, if it is understood as indicating employees' aspirations and as a form of cognitive coping, but not as representing actual exchange conditions.

It is affected by the social dominance of certain meaning constructions, not least including social patterns of legitimation and justice concepts.

Such conditioning (and not determination) of coping practices in existing relations of hegemony, fundamentally concerns all subjects within a given society. But, it might touch them differently - or, they will react to it in different ways - according to their specific social positions, personal histories, and respective resources. In fact, the connection between social structures, requirements, and calls on the one hand, and subjects' effective common sense, on the other, is far from linear, direct or predetermined. Instead, it passes through complex, multilevel mechanisms of articulation, producing mediation as well as ruptures and contradictions. Far too complex for being examined here in detail, these range from the social mode of regulation, its institutional and discursive, political, cultural, and normative elements, to the concrete organisation of production and reproduction of labour, of work processes, employment and gender relations and individual life courses. Crucially, the empirical analysis here has shown how this articulation and connection is effectuated (in a more or less encompassing, adaptive or opposing, self-willed way) by subjects themselves through their coping practices. These practices are developed in the diverse and concrete, practice-oriented situations that subjects encounter in their everyday life. While this study only looks at current daily work experiences, worldviews and common sense are generated throughout subjects' encompassing life activities and their whole life course - a process that cannot be examined here. If, as argued with reference to Hall, the effectuated coping practices in each specific situation constitute only 'temporary fixings' with regard to subjects' multiple and fragmented positionings in contradictory, conflictive social relations, then their here empirically detected contradictory character results as an unsurprising (possible and probable) consequence. (Hall 1990)

The point to make here is that employees' meaning constructions, as well as their agency, do not exist as such. But, they always already entail a (self-)positioning within a specific socio-historical context through which they gain a practical, agency-related importance. As such coping practices, structures of relevance are bound up with the agency requirements, ideological calls and power relations in concrete conflict situations (here the flexibility regulations and labour requirements at retail workplaces) and the effective action potential that specific meaning constructions can generate in this context.

This social and historical positioning of coping practices, and specifically of the fair exchange concept is now considered on three levels: with regard to (a) general capitalist configurations

of society, (b) neoliberal transformations in respective ideological calls, and concrete workplace regimes (8.3.3), and (c) individuals' socio-structural positions and resources (8.3.4).

Relating to social structures of capitalism in general, and thus, to an abstract level of analysis, employees' understandings of the labour relation as a fair exchange can be linked with what Marx called the ideology of commoditisation. As Marx suggested, the idea of a fair exchange of commodities for fair prices and (in the case of labour) fair wages is a structural product of capitalism and not the result of any individual imagination, 'mistake' or 'incapacity'. Fundamentally, it is based on the flawed perception of social relations of production as abstract relations between 'things' rather than as historically contingent, conflicting, politically, and power-structured interactions between human beings. This perception comes from social interactions in capitalism being shaped as commodity exchanges.

Consequently, concerning the issue of labour relations, the social character of labour becomes invisible within the respective common sense. This invisibility is related to two aspects: First, the social character of the value production in terms of exchange values - as labour capacity to produce new additional surplus values. Second, the social development potentials of labour in terms of its societal use value - as capacity to transform (internal and external) nature by transferring existing values onto new products and potentially increasing society's domain over human living conditions.<sup>239</sup> As a result of this double omission, the social usefulness of labour can appear as reduced to the generation of abstract exchange value - un-naming any

---

<sup>239</sup> In Marxist terms, with regard to labour relations, the ideology of commoditisation results in an omission of this double character of labour as producing both exchange and use value within a single, dynamic, and contradictory process. This dynamic and contradiction stems from the specific correlation between these two labour potentials as mutually producing and reproducing, enabling but also blocking each other. Through the ideology of commoditisation, both the differentiation, as well as the interrelation between exchange and use value get dissolved within subjects 'usual consciousness.' Different forms of labour are perceived as equal and comparable, based on their common abstract exchange value character. In this logic, labour is 'fairly' paid for its reproduction costs as measured by the amount of work hours. However, all that seems to matter for a 'fair exchange' in any specific labour relation is the individual, private usefulness of the given labour power in terms of the use value of the resulting labour product - as the worker is given money for doing a useful job and effectively transforming labour instruments and resources into a new usable, requested object or service. As Marx put it: "Since the producers do not come into social contact with each other until they exchange their products, the specific social character of each producer's labour does not show itself except in the act of exchange. In other words, the labour of the individual asserts itself as a part of the labour of society, only by means of the relations which the act of exchange establishes directly between the products, and indirectly, through them, between the producers. To the latter, therefore, the relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things. It is only by being exchanged that the products of labour acquire, as values, one uniform social status, distinct from their varied forms of existence as objects of utility. (...) Whence, then, arises the enigmatical character of the product of labour, so soon as it assumes the form of commodities? Clearly from this form itself. The equality of all sorts of human labour is expressed objectively by their products all being equally values; the measure of the expenditure of labour power by the duration of that expenditure, takes the form of the quantity of value of the products of labour; and finally the mutual relations of the producers, within which the social character of their labour affirms itself, take the form of a social relation between the products" (Marx 1996/MECW 35: 81ff).

potential social decision processes over the definition, content, and amount of socially useful labour. Simultaneously, the private appropriation of socially produced and transformed values, and thus, the issues of labour exploitation, power relations, and interest conflicts gets dissimulated behind the idea of a fair exchange and its moral justice claims.

As reflecting this ideology of commoditisation, the empirically determined concepts of fair exchange are to be considered as socially grounded constructions of meaning which point to the basic conditions of capitalist wage labour. In other words, they reflect general, basic models of coping with typically capitalist requirements of acting and thinking (Krauss 1996: 12, 21f). In fact, my empirical analysis highlights how this concerns all forms of more or less conflictive coping practices: Even the more conflictive concepts of the labour relation (sustaining practices of border drawing and conflictive negotiation) are influenced by the ideology of commoditisation - as they equally appear to be rooted in a morally charged exchange concept of mutual rights and duties.

In this sense, in referring to the generalised, collectively agency-relevant character of certain meaning constructions, grounded in the specific agency requirements of capitalist class society, the described coping practices can be identified as elements of a class subjectivity.<sup>240</sup> To be clear once again, if reference is made here to structural conditionality and to the ideology of commoditisation, this is not meant to indicate any form of determinism. It does not imply any necessary, predetermined forms of concrete individual thinking and acting, nor any automatic collective articulation or class-interested agency. But, these terms and arguments are considered useful in order to underline the social contextualisation of subjects' active coping practices, and not least their connection with social power relations. If it is true that employees' adherence to a logic of fair exchange in the empirical cases at hand reflects their strive towards gaining action potential, and, as part of this, for social recognition and self-constitution through identitarian positionings, the accepted criteria for related justice claims are neither arbitrary, individual nor pre-given, externally defined values. They are interlinked with the historical formation of society through which they emerge. The same

---

<sup>240</sup> The use of term 'class subjectivity' in critical psychology indicates patterns of thinking grounded in a collective social position and respective agency requirements. It is used here (instead of 'class consciousness') to highlight the social positioning of coping practices, without linking them to any ex-ante given content, nor to any presumed collective subject. This is an attempt to take account of both the socio-structural value of classical Marxist class analysis as well as its lacking acknowledgement of the self-will and the concrete conditions of possible collective agency. As Krauss puts it: "The basic characteristic of class subjectivity under wage labour is not the concreteness of its content, but that it is centred on and grounded in psychological requirements of regulation regarding an individual's subject constitution and self-reproduction under the conditions of an existence based on wage labour. (...) But, the dialectic relation between abstract-general unity (class subjectivity) and concrete multiplicity and variation (patterns of agency orientations, lifestyles, etc.) does not lead to any spontaneous homogeneous class mentality, interest formation, articulation or realisation" (Krauss 1996: 21f; translation K.C.).

holds true for the central importance of issues and conflicts of recognition within employees' current daily work experiences.

### 8.3.3 Contextualisation 2: Neoliberal performance concepts and power relations at the workplace

As indicated, the mechanisms of connection and articulation between this structural level of analysis and a subject's actual, concrete acting and thinking are multiple and complex, open to variations, contradictions, and self-willed subjective realisations. Moreover, forms and patterns of articulation are historically specific: They vary and change with the development of different modes of production. The structurally conditioned character of the ideology of commoditisation might, thus, explain the constant relevance of fair exchange concepts as well as continuities within employees' coping practices from one mode of production to the other - here from Fordism to Post-Fordism. But, the precise character of such fair exchange concepts, the ways they are translated in a subject's common sense and how they gain legitimacy and consent, decisively change in a context of neoliberal regulation and under the Post-Fordist regime of subjectifying labour control. The aim in the following is to argue how employees' consent to given work conditions, their continuous belief in a fair exchange, and their limited engagement in open workplace conflict (as a reaction to frustrated aspirations) don't simply result from any abstract, ideological force of social relations, but from the very concrete and practical performance requirements and power relations that shape employees' daily work conditions. This is done in two steps, considering changes in the current patterns of legitimation for such performance requirements, and addressing employees' action potential in front of the individualised, informal regime of labour relations and control.

Within the Fordist mode of production, the idea of a fair exchange is an explicit part and basis for class compromise and workers' integration (Menz 2009). The important point to make here on the basis of the above empirical analysis is that under the conditions of Post-Fordism, such a traditional work ethic with its moral justice aspirations 'productively' meets the neoliberal imperatives of individual performance maximisation, self-responsibility, and self-marketing. With respect to the relevance of moral justice concepts for both hegemonic ideological calls and subjects' common sense, this combination of 'old' and 'new' elements indicates an important, but nonetheless only gradual shift in the dominant regime of legitimation.

The continuous significance of the fair exchange notion within employees' common sense might appear as a continuity to the Fordist period, and thus, encourage the view that 'nothing has really changed'.<sup>241</sup> On a second glance, it becomes clear how these only apparent continuities in fact rather represent gradual shifts and re-articulations in coping practices. These re-articulations reflect both long term societal developments, as well as the specific conditions of the current individualised, informal modus of labour control, namely its inherent pressures of subjectification, individualisation, and precarisation. Thus, it would be equally misleading to assume a radical break and a completely new regime of legitimation has taken place.<sup>242</sup>

In his analysis of current regimes of legitimation at the workplace, Menz speaks of a replacement of Fordist concepts of performance justice by a Post-Fordist market-oriented regime of legitimation (Menz 2009). With respect to the analysis of retail employees' coping practices here at hand, it seems to be more pertinent to stress the continuous relevance of moral, performance based justice concepts rather than to insist on their, even only partial, erosion. In other words, the market regime might lack its own moral foundation, but it effectively relates to, integrates and at the same time renews 'old' performance requirements as well as subjective aspirations in performance justice. Beyond Dubet et al's insistence in the relevance of moral concepts of the 'good life,' justice expectations evidently are and remain relevant not only with regard to the 'life sphere,' but also emanate from the work process itself. In this, they are to be analysed as coping practices rather than as reflections of a taken for granted objective reality as in Dubet et al's or also Hall and Atkinson's analysis.

Regarding the changes in patterns of legitimation, which result from this combination on the side of management strategies, the content of the justice concept itself is reformulated rather than dismissed. It is combined with further, performance related ideological calls and requirements. In fact, the here analysed labour processes and management strategies still entail renewed promises of performance justice. Thus, requirements of increased availability are combined with promises of 'earned' payoff in terms of future employment stabilisation, professional growth, and corporate participation (regarding recognition as self-responsible

---

<sup>241</sup> The same seems to be the case with regard to the described practices of separation. As demonstrated, separations are effectuated in employees' constructions of meaning not only between work and life, but also between collective regulations and interest struggles on the one hand and consent-oriented, personalised individual everyday interactions at the work place on the other. That is, employees' cognitive coping patterns still reflect a typically Fordist institutionalisation of capitalist society's division lines: not only between public and private, but also between political and economic spheres.

<sup>242</sup> As argued in chapter two, historical development processes of society are characterised by a double movement of breaks and continuities. Consequently, a subject's coping practices can be expected to simultaneously display old and new shapes, resulting in gradual, but non-linear shifts, dis- and relocations rather than completely new, dissociated forms as compared to the former, Fordist mode of production.

firm actors in the labour process and as members of a corporate identity). Such promises were mentioned previously as a precondition for the integrative force of management's strategies of (repressive) subjectification. Aside from employees' own practices of balancing contradiction, the discrepancy between promised and actual payoff is furthermore buffered on management's side by articulating such promises with ideological calls of self-regulation and self-responsibility. Through this articulation, economic necessity, and market success do not replace, but are incorporated into concepts of performance justice. It is this articulation and integration, which is at the basis of radicalised Post-Fordist performance imperatives and which makes it possible to connect these with employees' intrinsic interests.

On the side of employees' aspirations, the continuing relevance of moral justice expectations in terms of fair exchange concepts is closely linked to the radicalisation of performance imperatives in Post-Fordist labour processes itself. In the interviews conducted, these moral concepts not only serve as disciplinary management tools, but have an important function for employees as cognitive coping practices in the face of such radicalised performance imperatives. As seen with regard to the diverse practices of adaptation, border drawing, and conflictive negotiation, the moral concept of a fair exchange constitutes a bulwark against the new, unlimited performance imperatives, and a source of meaning and legitimation for the market regime. As regards the latter function, it has been demonstrated how this cognitive pattern simultaneously keeps up faith in the logic of merit and sustains belief in workers' duties and in the conditional character of workers' rights. It plays an important role in creating and maintaining acceptance for such requirements as individual availability and self-responsible contribution to market performance and payoff. Moreover, adherence to such moral expectations lessens experiences of individual failure. As described, this happens by postulating the state of being blocked in a precarious employment position and not receiving 'due' compensation for given performances and availability as injustice - and hence by limiting internalisation of responsibility for this situation.

The disintegration of performance requirements and subjective justice concepts (Menz 2009), or promised and expected performance recognition compared to a lacking recognition and pay-off, does not necessarily produce a crisis of legitimation for management's labour control strategies, unlike what Menz argues. This is neither with regard to the Fordist or the Post-Fordist aspects of respective patterns of legitimation. In relying on moral justice expectations, employees' coping practices take the described buffering, contradiction-balancing, and psychological contract maintaining function. As argued above, it is not despite but due to their contradictory character, due to the effectuated balancing of persisting contradictions, that



these coping practices gain practical relevance for employees' agency: They allow for integration, adaptation to given conditions, endurance of or even resistance to experienced precarisation, vulnerability, and failure by maintaining aspirations in the constantly negated, but also called at and promised success, payoff, and recognition of labour performance within this same given system. In contrast, as indicated by the relevance of a conflictive concept of labour relations for employees' practices of border drawing and negotiation, developing conflictive agency and enlarged, change-oriented capacities to act presupposes a critical stance towards any such moral justice expectations and respective patterns of legitimation. That is, if any, a crisis of legitimation of the Post-Fordist market regime might result not from a supposed given internal, inherent lack of a moral basis, but from employees' capacity to overcome the dominance of moral justice concepts within their common sense. Or, from the substitution of such concepts with a conflictive, interest oriented understanding of labour relations and the therein entailed capacities of structural analysis and generalisation. Yet, rather than any clear-cut substitution, a contradictory combination of justice and interest oriented concepts of the labour relation was found as sustaining (but at the same time limiting) the empirically discovered conflictive coping patterns.

After having analysed these connections between fair exchange beliefs and neoliberal concepts of performance justice, now, the issue of employees' action potential is discussed. Across all the different coping patterns in the above empirical analysis, the overall degree of acquired action potential remains limited. This is the case not only for plainly adaptive coping practices and/or the withdrawal from workplace conflicts inherent in practices of border drawing. While conflictive negotiation is clearly practiced by only a minority,<sup>243</sup> even this form of confrontational coping generates only limited possibilities to durably change given work conditions. This reduced action potential is now analysed in terms of consequences of both unequal power relations at the workplaces and inconsistencies in employees' common sense itself. In fact, trying to explain the maintenance of workplace consent (and the continuous relevance of fair exchange beliefs) in a situation of strong frustration of employees' aspirations regarding work and employment conditions, in general, and opportunities of participation and recognition, in particular, attention does not only have to be paid to patterns of legitimation, ideological calls, and cognitive forms of coping. But, the

---

<sup>243</sup> This is remarkable as access to interview partners was obtained through union representatives. As such, a more pronounced disposition towards 'critical struggle attitudes' could have been suspected to emerge. Instead, taking into consideration this sample bias, the detected lack of action potential appears as even more severe.

actual, material power relations at the workplace (and beyond) have to be included in the picture.

On all levels of coping, limited action potential is reflected by the meager success of individual availability demonstrations in terms of obtained compensations and recognition, the low actual capacities of rejecting labour requirements, or the mainly mental character of respective border drawing in the form of cognitive distancing and withdrawal from work. Finally, it is displayed in the restricted and unstable results of individual negotiations with direct superiors. Looking back, the limited, protective character of employees' claims for their own control mirrors such reduced action potential.<sup>244</sup>

Regarding power relations, these generalised limits of actual capacities to act clearly reflect employees' weak individual power positions within the regime of repressive integration with its individualised informal labour relations. They further underline the importance of coercive mechanisms for the functioning of current flexibility regulations and the construction of workplace consent, without, however, reducing the importance of a participatory management rhetoric and employees' own respective aspirations. As demonstrated, this coercive force is produced by the described mechanism of blackmailing and precarisation. In the end, individual employees appear to have little to oppose to it, even where they develop more conflictive coping practices. Hence, employees' capacities to act remain limited not only because their coping practices entail an internalisation and containment of unresolved conflicts. But because the given power relations do not yield more.<sup>245</sup>

Instead, the present workplace regime stimulates individualised forms of coping and simultaneously curtails the development of any form of collectivism. As based on the logic of merit and personal preference, the individualised, informal, and authoritarian regime of labour control enhances personalised visions of social relations and workplace conflicts, as well as competition and respective practices of distinction.<sup>246</sup> Such individualised forms of coping

---

<sup>244</sup> In chapter seven it has been noted that claims for one's own control over flexibility are voiced mainly in terms of a protection from management requests and not as aspirations for one's own self-interested flexibility arrangements.

<sup>245</sup> There do not seem to be profound differences in this between the considered companies. In all cases, practices of conflictive negotiation are developed only by a minority, but they exist in all four firms. Thus, firm-specific differences in management strategies (regarding flexibility and participation) might be important for structuring daily conflicts through the distribution of resources for both conflict and adaptation. Yet, their common traits as producing individualised, informal labour relations and a workplace regime based on blackmailing and (repressive) participatory calls appear to be more relevant for employees' gained action potential than differences in their precise shape and the exact combinations of repressive and participatory control devices.

<sup>246</sup> Briefly returning to the issue of historical breaks and continuities, such individualisation and fragmentation does not only concern Post-Fordist workplace regimes, but is linked to long term tendencies of social dissociation at a societal scale. Such processes of socio-structural fragmentation gained importance already during (late) Fordism, but they were accelerated under the conditions of neoliberalism. Following Krauss, regarding subjects' acting and thinking, social dissociation is reflected in practices of privatising delimitation and

further weaken employees' disadvantaged power positions in the face of management and keeps them trapped in the precariousness of individualised informal labour relations. Any stabilisation of potentially brittle, contradictory forms of workplace consent and management control, thus, is an outcome of these combined forces of structural power relations at the workplace and employees' own individualised coping practices - or of their lacking collective action potential, as an expression of such unequal power relations. It is these power relations that would have to be changed to allow for any enlarged action potential.

In fact, employees might well be aware that their everyday work reality does not represent any fair exchange, but is marked by such heavily unequal power positions. Yet, due to experienced precarisation, high performance and continuous self-activation pressures, disadvantaged power positions and lacking alternative action potential, they might nonetheless not be able or willing to dismiss the concept of a fair exchange as an immediately useful coping practice, a cognitive frame for orientation, and a claim or aspiration. If a majority of employees under these work and employment conditions consents to management's requests for flexibility, self-regulation, and participation, or at least does not enter into any open individual or collective conflict despite experienced frustration, this can be effectively analysed as a "pragmatic survival reflex," as Artus does with reference to Bourdieu's term of "practical sense" (Artus 2008, 2008a: 328). The same holds true for employees' expressions of relative satisfaction, their practices of distinction or the maintenance of fair exchange aspirations. It is through this "pragmatic survival reflex" that the terms of trade of a still accepted fair exchange can shift from an exchange between endured alienation and obtained compensation (Krauss 1996), to an exchange of endured precarisation (including low, unstable wages) and internalised self-responsibility against (even only promised) symbolical recognition. Besides meeting enforced needs for symbolic recognition and for countering experiences of personal failure generated by precarisation, such cognitive coping allows employees to dismiss unsettling experiences of conflicts, contradictions, as well as limited capacities to act, and thus, to reduce the perceived necessity for anymore personal conflictive agency.

Employees' restricted possibilities for acting result from missing or underdeveloped conflict handling abilities, and not simply from a lacking understanding of reality. It's not that employees don't know about power and interest differences, but this knowledge coexists with

---

an increasingly anonymous character of social relations. In his terms, and similar to the forms of coping described here, these practices are strongly based on moral distinctions. They are used to claim one's own superiority and to sustain actual inner conformity and rule internalisation against experiences of one's own failure and (risks of) social degradation (Krauss 1996).

and is subsumed by the described coping practices. The contradictory and incoherent character of employees' common sense does not only assure the maintenance of workplace consent and effectiveness of adaptive coping practices. In Gramscian terms, it moreover constitutes the crucial limit for employees' capacities to develop alternative, enlarged forms of agency. This appears to be an effective vicious circle of being blocked in individualised coping practices, as inconsistencies in a subject's common sense are themselves continuously reproduced by such lacking enlarged capacities to act.

On a theoretical level, asserting contradictions and inconsistencies as inherent in a subject's common sense questions an important aspect of Schütz' concept of subjective relevance structures. From this perspective, the development of cognitive coping practices does not represent a linear, coherent process of continuous learning and knowledge acquisition or re-elaboration through new experiences, as portrayed by Schütz. Instead, this development comprises the various forms of balancing out experienced conflicts. That is, problematic experiences and situations exceeding or contradicting the explanatory power of available meaning constructions are effectively transferred into unquestionable facts. Or, the need for explanation arising from such experiences is fulfilled, as Schütz tends to explain with his model of motivational, thematic, and interpretative relevance. But, this occurs without problems and contradictions being solved and eliminated from a subject's common sense by means of a coherent reelaboration of meaning constructions. In contrast, in this process of contradiction balancing once acquired knowledge, including hegemonic ideological calls, tends to be reaffirmed. Any questioning of a society's dominant and sanctioned worldviews, and any re-elaboration of previously established subjective patterns of thinking and orientation would require addressing so far only balanced or even masked and un-named conflicts. This would require risking and abandoning acquired (limited) action potential, and to question one's own habitus, worldviews, and self-concepts that these capacities of acting are based on. Therefore, employees have a concrete, immediate interest in hindering the acquisition of new knowledge by sticking to their routine, previously approved coping practices.

This argument about (in)coherence and change of employees' meaning constructions again points to the different depths of the social and practice-related character that is attributed to subjects' meaning constructions, on the one hand, in phenomenological approaches, and, on the other, in Gramscian, critical-psychology based theoretical concepts. It recalls the above explained criticism of Schütz' ontological perspective, resulting from its lacking recognition of power structures and their (re)production processes.

On this backdrop, it becomes clear that enlarged capacities to act cannot simply result from a respective development of employees' consciousness as only a cognitive process. In contrast, to disrupt the cycle of conflict balancing, such capacities need to be practically achieved within the process of coping and confrontation with social reality. Again in Gramscian terms, enlarged action potential presupposes a subject's own autonomous efforts to render his or her common sense coherent. Or, acquiring enlarged action potential is a reflexive process that requires appropriation of knowledge through concrete experience (Krauss 1996).<sup>247</sup>

In such a process, "subjective relevance structures" (Schütz 1971) and resulting meaning constructions (namely the concept of a fair exchange) would have to become problematic, or, they would have to gain thematic relevance themselves. As just outlined, this is far from automatic or necessarily resulting from experienced contradictions. As long as contradictions and conflicts are bearable and can effectively be balanced, and that is, as long as employees are willing to pay the price for continuous conflict internalisation and resulting frustration (or only partial integration) of intrinsic interests, such thematic relevance will not emerge but rather be successfully concealed.

First, as argued by Schütz, any possible breakpoint depends on a subject's motivations or on the motivational relevance attributed to specific interests and conflicts. But, if such motivational relevance is socially conditioned, its formation is also a contingent process open to change. Second, any practical achievement of enlarged action potential is a question of concrete conflict and struggle capacities. Given the described limited individual power positions, it necessarily requires a process of collective empowerment.

#### 8.3.4 Contextualisation 3: Employees' socio-structural positioning

Before addressing the issue of collective coping practices and respective action potential, individuals' socio-structural positioning must be taken into account as a final level concerning the social grounding of coping practices. The just described overall limited character of action potential is not the same for all employees. Instead, a person's socio-structural positioning is relevant for the development of more or less combative coping practices and respective action

---

<sup>247</sup> Also Glißmann and Peters call for such a process of self-reflection as precondition for acquiring new (collective) struggle capacities. (Glißmann/Peters 2001) Kratzer moreover sees the subjectification of labour as a potential catalyser for critical self-reflection, due to the internalisation of the transformation problem it produces, and thus the immediate, internalised need to cope with the related contradictions between exploitation, performance and life interests. (Kratzer 2003: 200) Yet, notwithstanding this potential, analysis here has pointed to the powerful strategies by which employees balance these contradictions.

potential, because it influences the specific interest configurations and resources for coping that are available to each employee.<sup>248</sup>.

The frequent importance of employment histories and biographical positions was already indicated above with regard to the location of young, recent employees from firm I in the pattern of happy integration versus the concentration of their older colleagues together with the more experienced young workforce from G among those practicing forms of personal strike and strong border drawing. Regarding gender, fewer women than men were found to be among those employees actively negotiating their own interests. To some extent, this might also be due to the sample's composition. Only male employees were interviewed in firm G, which is the work context with the most strong conflict experiences and high levels of frustration overall. Above all, limited conflictive practices reflect women's disadvantaged position within both formal and informal workplace hierarchies. A male-dominated culture within the institutions of collective interest representation makes it more difficult for women to get access to relevant collective resources and experiences, which could offer support in a concrete conflict situation, might foster a conflictive understanding of the labour relation, and yield concrete struggle experiences. Finally, women, due to their still decisive double-burden of wage employment and reproductive care work at home, also have less time to engage in workplace struggles, or even to participate in an interview. In other words, the sample composition in the most conflictive shop G is no coincidence, but rather reflects social positionings, discriminations, and hierarchies. On this backdrop, it is little surprising if especially the 'happily integrated' female employees in firm C appear to have effectively internalised and are content with the perception of their wage work as a secondary part-time employment position.

The type of employment contract, in turn, decisively appears to matter for coping and gained action potential, as it influences available resources and individual power positions or vulnerability. Thus, three out of four considered (still) temporary employees voice strong adaptive and integration focussed coping practices. Obviously, as the most vulnerable group, it is particularly difficult for temporary staff to develop conflictive responses to management's requirements, respective excessive demands, and impositions. Yet, especially in this group, integration and workforce alignment are justified by the interviewees themselves with a relative satisfaction and a hope in future development rather than in terms

---

<sup>248</sup> As stated before, given the limited number of interviews per case, the following can offer only a rough description of detected differences in the distribution of coping patterns and action potential, which rather raises questions than giving answers regarding the role and relevance of social categories of distinction. This is particularly the case for the considerations regarding gender relations, as this issue was not addressed in more detail in the empirical analysis

of fear and vulnerability. It was shown how such reasoning constitutes part of subjects' endurance strategies by which they face destabilizing experiences of precarisation and (re)produce self-esteem. At the other end of the scale, despite implicit conflict experiences, half of the interviewed permanent full-time employees integrate into the work context by means of adaptation, while the other half develops conflictive negotiation strategies. As already argued with regard to more or less strongly voiced conflict experiences, developing more adaptive or more conflictive coping practices appears to be a question of perceived rather than objective vulnerability and, correspondingly, of relative satisfaction or frustration. Thus, among those interviewees practicing happy integration there are mostly (a) objectively highly precarious, temporary employees, and (b) employees strongly hoping for future stabilisation and growth. Such adaptation can be found also among (c) relatively satisfied permanent part-timers, be they truly satisfied or only satisficing with their current position and work conditions. In all three cases, the results are 'obedient employees' (Dörre 2009). Border drawing and conflictive negotiation, in contrast, are mostly spread not only among (a) permanent full-timers (representing the most consolidated, objectively least precarious employment position), but also among (b) unsatisfied permanent part-timers and, particularly, those interviewees expressing strong frustration and a sense of not having anything to lose under the given conditions. For both groups, though to different degrees, reducing one's own perceived vulnerability is crucial to be able to develop conflictive coping practices. Such a reduction of perceived vulnerability might take different forms with contrasting effects. Achieved by practices of 'satisficing' – 'No, I am not vulnerable, because I'm fine with my situation' and 'I'm fine because my work satisfies the employer' - it fosters adaptation and integration. Produced by an active struggle attitude – 'I am vulnerable, but (that's why) I need to fight' and 'I am less vulnerable because I fight' – it might instead serve as a basis for conflictive negotiations.

Yet, following Bourdieu's distinction of different forms of capital (Bourdieu 1987a), coping practices should be expected to vary not only according to individuals' economic capital - in this case their more or less precarious employment position. In addition, they will be influenced by employees' access to cultural and social forms of capital. Regarding social capital, capacities to actively construct and manage personalised social relations appear as particularly important from my data. This is the case both for adaptive and conflictive practices, as such capacities determine employees' chances of achieving a place in the 'in-group' of well-integrated staff as well as their negotiation power and capacities in direct conflicts with superiors. Managing social relations is also an important resource for coping

with regard to interactions with colleagues (mediating or enacting cheating and competition) and customers (managing emotional labour and gaining recognition for one's work).

Cultural capital is relevant for employees' coping practices especially in informal terms, and that is a non-recognised form of capital. This primarily regards employees' claims for their own practical knowledge of service and production processes. Formal cultural capital, in terms of certified educational and professional degrees, appears to play only a minor, indirect role as they influence employees' position on the external labour market, and thus their exit opportunities regarding their current job. Yet, independently from formal qualifications, dreams of exiting as well as fear of lacking labour market alternatives proved relevant (for adaptive coping practices) across all employee groups. This again indicates the no longer transitional character of retail labour as an entrance into the labour market, but its tendency to become a long term, permanent place of employment also for workers with higher educational degrees.

Finally, interviewees' collective cultural heritage proved to be important for the development of conflictive coping practices. This concerns access to alternative forms of acting and thinking (i.e. different from management's merit discourses and fair exchange ideology) and to cognitive as well as material collective resources. In the cases at hand, such collective cultural capital, more precisely, relates to one's own former, current, or aspired future active participation in union activities (especially as a shop steward: Cristian/C2, Eric/G, or as possible future candidate: Elena/C2, Valentina/D). Moreover, it emerges from well beyond the workplace, namely from socialisation processes within the family (including the family's 'union tradition': Cristian/C2) and participation in political collectives (Mimmo/C2). Finally, personal friendship relations are important (as for Valentina/D who came into contact with unions through a friend working as union secretary) In other words, the simple presence of institutions of collective interest representation at the workplace, and of some personal or professional contacts between individual employees and shop floor representatives (procuring access to interviewees) are not enough to sustain conflictive coping practices and critical, change-oriented action potential.

In sum, capacities to develop enlarged, conflictive and change oriented coping practices of strong border drawing (including forms of personal strike and rejection of labour requirements) and conflictive negotiation seem to depend most crucially on employees' capacities to reduce their own perceived vulnerability, on the acquired social position within the workplace hierarchy, and on an external input of collective cognitive resources to perceive alternatives for their agency. Importantly, the social position at the workplace grants



employees relative power positions and negotiation capacities in the face of superiors. In this, an already achieved relative employment stabilisation, or a relative satisfaction with the current job, constitutes an important pre-condition for a combative attitude. But, such relative power positions are neither linked exclusively to the formal employment status, nor to further socio-structural categories of distinction such as gender and age. Instead, as the example of Valentina/D has shown, they also result from an informally acquired status. This is based on an individual employee's work experiences in that precise context, the acquired responsibilities and strategic position within the work process, the established personal relations with superiors, and the 'fame' or recognition both as conflictive negotiator and responsible firm-actor. In this, capacities to develop combative practices, to oppose management, and to appropriate a relative power position crucially appear to depend on employees' mental self-positioning as combative and competent firm actors. That is, on a cognitive appropriation of action potential, which precedes enacting the respective coping practices in a given situation, but is fostered through this enacting and especially a (perceived, relative) success. Such appropriation constitutes a first step in actively rendering one's common sense more coherent. Though still lacking collective support for such so far individual practices and attitudes crucially limits these capacities. This will be the topic of the following chapter.

## 9. Collective coping practices

This last empirical chapter deals with collective forms of coping. It starts out with an overview of employees' ambiguous collective experiences: marked by a high subjective relevance and by a strong simultaneous lack of respective resources and capacities. This overview is followed up and enriched by sections describing in more detail employees' attitudes towards institutionalised labour relations and everyday shop floor solidarity.

If a distinction is made between participation in institutional forms of interest representation and collective agency on the shop floor, this is not intended as an absolute division line. Obviously, participation in institutionalised forms of interest representation might also comprise strikes and an active engagement in struggles on the shop floor. At least in the cases at hand, such participation remains directed by union representatives and largely confined to periods of national, company-level collective bargaining. Collective shop floor agency, in contrast, is understood here as a form of self-organised (though possibly union supported) agency to face daily conflicts regarding the work process.

### *9.1 Introduction: Subjective relevance of collective agency and interest representation*

On an objective, structural level, employees' experiences of precarisation, their limited individual power positions and action potential point to a lack of collective resources and capacities that could reduce individual vulnerability. In fact, this lack is articulated on a subjective level. In chapter seven, competition, cheating, and mistrust among colleagues, as well as anti-union pressures, erosion of collective norms, and unions' deteriorating power positions in collective bargaining were already briefly indicated as central conflict experiences regarding collective resources. These conflict experiences clearly express a disparity between an experienced need and the actually limited availability of collective resources. On this backdrop, it is not surprising that a majority of interviewees expressed strong importance for the existence of institutionalised forms of collective interest representation. Such subjective relevance of collective institutions concerns different classical functions of unions and shop stewards alike - namely acting as advocates in the case of concrete individual conflicts with the employer or with direct superiors, and offering information about management strategies and one's own rights. Last but not least, unions'

role in collective bargaining is considered a vital means of protection against management's arbitrariness and as important for enforcing collective rights.<sup>249</sup>

In concrete terms, this subjective relevance translates into a comparatively high degree of unionisation among the interviewed employees, reaching slightly above 50%: ten out of 19 interviewees are union members, eight from the CGIL and two from the UIL. These numbers definitely reflect the specific sample composition, which results from interview access through union officers and shop stewards. Consequently, three out of the four considered companies represent highly unionised realities. As indicated above, in firms G and C unionisation reaches 60% and 70%. It is still relatively high in company I with 25%, as compared to the sector's average of 15-20%, whereas firm D is weakly unionised only in the centralised stocks.

Union affiliation is only a very rough indicator of individuals' collective attitudes. Of more interest in terms of the acquisition of everyday action potential, instead, are employees' ideas about and their concrete participation in different forms of collective agency and their use of collective support strategies. Proactive attitudes towards collective interest representation, linking declaration of unions' relevance with concepts of one's own active role in a conflictive process of collective interest defence appear as rather limited. Subjective relevance of collective institutions is articulated often only in an abstract way: only when explicitly

---

<sup>249</sup> Referring to Schütz' terminology, the concept of subjective relevance of collective interest representation, as well as the distinction of different functions of institutionalised collective actors, is taken from Holtrup (Holtrup 2007). In an empirical study on employees' collective attitudes in the bank sector, as well as the metal and electronic industries, Holtrup points out the continuous relevance of institutions of collective interest representation in a context of subjectification and individualisation – and in combination with relevant interests in self-regulation and participation.

The functions of collective actors presented here regard the shop floor level. Differentiations in the perception of internal (shop stewards) and external (unions) actors are considered later. However, my interviews did not inquire in detail into the subjective relevance given to activities of unions as societal actors beyond the company level. On the one hand, this is due to the study's focus on employees' own action potential. On the other, the differentiation between internal and external collective actors is less pronounced in the Italian system of industrial relations than in the German context. Shop stewards here are always direct union representative and elected through union lists only.

The following elaborations on different patterns of participation in institutional interest representation entail some important similarities to Holtrup's findings. This concerns the limited scope of democratic, participatory claims regarding shop stewards work. While such reduced aspirations in an active participation are described here with reference to employees' attitudes towards their own participation in collective agency and in the institutions of collective interest representation, Holtrup rather relates to the limited scope of participatory claims regarding shop stewards participation in firm and management decisions. Another difference regards the relevance of different shop stewards' functions. Holtrup indicates a loss of relevance of shop stewards as advocates in case of individual problems and a constant relevance as collective actors negotiating work conditions with the firm. The here presented interviews point to an important perception of and reliance on shop stewards as advocates for individual problems, as well as a strong relevance as collective actors with regulatory functions as a counterweight against management's labour requirements. Though, the latter function is perceived only on a rather abstract level, without linking it to any further interest in and knowledge of concrete shop stewards activities and negotiation efforts. The difference in the relevance of advocacy functions might well be due to the specific sample composition in the cases here at hand - as access to interview partners passes through shop stewards and union representatives - as well as to the different professional fields.

asked for by the interviewer and detached from spontaneous storytelling about daily individual work experiences of precarisation. Regarding collective agency at the shop floor, importance is equally given to friendly, cooperative social relations. Yet, this desire is only rarely articulated in terms of collective shop floor struggles and daily solidarity in concrete conflicts. In sum, such limited collective attitudes mirror the above analysed individualised character of coping practices.

Employees separate collective interest conflicts from daily-lived interactions at the shop floor. Collective interest conflicts are imagined and located only on the macro level of confrontation between institutional actors, unions versus company management. Daily interactions at the micro level of the shop floor, instead, are viewed from a personalised, consent-oriented perspective. That is, preferences for cooperative relations also shape the perception of interactions with superiors. In line with this distinction, responsibility for the enforcement of collective rights and desired work conditions is delegated to unions and shop stewards. As a coping practice, such separation allows for expressing frustration and criticising work conditions - without having to question one's own individual availability strategies, which curtail any struggles for one's own rights. In consequence, one's own collective agency often does not even emerge on a cognitive level as an alternative to individualised coping practices. Correspondingly, institutions of collective interest representation tend not to be perceived as resources for one's own collective empowerment.

It has already been demonstrated how personalisation plays a role even for employees' conflictive individual negotiation strategies. But, mostly, it keeps interviewees' trapped in individual adaptation strategies, as it supports fair exchange concepts, helps transferring conflicts, and replaces lacking capacities of structural analysis and generalisation. Of specific interest here is that, beyond sustaining consent-oriented interactions with superiors and venting about cheating and mistrust among colleagues, personalisation characterises the way solidarity and collective interest representation are experienced. Even where employees use union support in conflictive situations, this is most often still experienced as individual struggle. Regarding complaints about colleagues' limited mobilisation for their own rights and their lacking participation in union assemblies and strikes, such colleagues' behaviour is also frequently attributed to personal character and individualistic attitudes. Finally, social relations with colleagues are, first of all, perceived as private friendship relations.

The backside of these practices of separation, personalisation, and individualisation is a serious lack of practical collective (struggle) experiences in everyday work life, which reflects, but also continuously reproduces, a simultaneous shortage of both collective material

resources and collective cognitive capacities.<sup>250</sup> As argued before with individualised coping practices, this double lack is clearly enhanced by the described context of individualised and informalised labour relations and respective flexibility regulations. On the backdrop of this analysis, the following sections demonstrate what kind of collective attitudes employees develop in this context, both on the level of institutional interest representation and daily shop floor solidarity. How these attitudes reflect and contribute to the reproduction of lacking collective capacities is also considered.

## ***9.2 Participation in institutional interest representation 1: Limited participation and anti-union pressures for temporary employees***

Regarding lacking collective material resources, access to institutionalised collective interest representation proved to be the central issue in the cases at hand. Experiences of precarisation and vulnerability, on a collective level, do not only result from unions' limited capacities to enforce collective rights and assure their application in daily labour processes against tendencies of informalisation and individualisation. In addition, precarisation affects employees' capacities to enact their right to participate in this collective interest defence. As already hinted at in chapters six and seven, companies exercise relevant anti-union pressures especially on temporary employees.

*Chiara: They [management] didn't even ask you if you wanted to participate [in union assemblies]. They just told you: today, you have to do this and that extra-hour because there are the union assemblies. That's it, as temporary staff you had to do overtime. Fairly, you had to cover the turns of those who went to the assemblies (Chiara/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C1).<sup>251</sup>*

Most interviewees in this sample describe the resulting reduced access to shop floor assemblies, union support, strikes, and elections of shop stewards as limiting, negative experience. As for temporary employees in general, a majority of them seem to have accepted this state as part of the necessary, normal conditions of a transition period. Only a minority clearly criticises this as a negation of workers' rights. And only an even smaller minority declares a desire to resist anti-union pressures and participate in collective interest

---

<sup>250</sup> This distinction between material resources and cognitive capacities is taken from Ferreras. As can be seen in the following, the empirical outcomes regarding this fundamental lack of resources and capacities represent important parallels to her analysis of collective experiences and attitudes among Belgian supermarket cashiers - though daily shop floor solidarity is given more relevance here.

<sup>251</sup> All interviews in this study were conducted in Italian. All quoted interview passages provided in this chapter have been translated from Italian into English by the author.

representation during temporary employment. In these latter cases, participation under precarious conditions is described in a personalising way as an unproblematic individual choice, simply depending on one's own character and will. All in all, anti-union pressures appear less dramatic in employees' than in shop stewards accounts. Both such meaning constructions of 'normal exclusion' and 'easy resistance,' however, could also be interpreted as effective forms of coping with experienced pressures by downscaling their effects and demonstrating only limited anxiety. Interestingly, 'normalisation' can go hand in hand with expressing a general need for overcoming personal fear and challenging management's blackmailing power: Participation in collective action is still seen as important to change given work conditions. This is once again an example of the contradictory shape of employees' common sense, as it reflects and balances concrete social contradictions.

Beyond the question of direct access to and participation in collective institutions, as Artus underlines, management's stigmatisation of collective interest representation as hostile to a firm's success and its corporate identity renders any deeper identification with collective forms difficult (Artus 2008). This is all the more the case as such repressive management strategies are combined with effective forms of normative control and partial internalisation. Finally, following Artus, the experience of a precarious labour market position (be it with regard to the internal or external labour market) enhances a perception of one's impotence in the face of companies' contrasting concentrated power as global multinational players.

For the interviewees undertaken here, limited overall identification with institutional interest defence seems to be just a minor phenomenon. In fact, regarding current patterns of participation in collective interest presentation, only a minority of employees from firm D's non-unionised shops expressed complete disinterest in any future introduction of institutionalised collective interest representation. In contrast, they placed more trust in their own individual availability demonstrations and/or negotiations with direct superiors as opposed to expecting a union to effectively oppose their management and change work conditions. This attitude is supported by a largely individualised vision of work and employment relations, as well as by an evaluation of possible union activities, which is focussed on personal and immediate advantages. Interestingly, in the case of a permanent full-time employee, reluctance towards institutionalised collective agency is still justified by the fear of dismissal. Here, a continuous self-construction as precarious could be interpreted as a way of legitimating one's own individualised coping practices.

In contrast, all other interviewees who successfully passed from temporary to permanent employment, either on a full-time or part-time basis have become affiliated with a union. They declare regularly participating in union assemblies and mostly also in strikes. What is more, they strongly voice this participation as part of their workers' rights and identity.

However, as can be seen with the still temporary employees and similar to the situation in firm D, during this extremely precarious period, accepting exclusion from collective institutions most often goes hand in hand with demonstrating disinterest in collective forms and actors. This is reflected in a limited knowledge about unions' and shop stewards' concrete activities, as well as in a particularly strong belief in and a high (moral) valorisation in individual conflict solutions. That is, at least in the absence of additional external collective cultural resources and capacities (acquired during socialisation), material exclusion tends to support a cognitive distancing from or at least a non-approximation to collective actors. Interviewees' description of an unproblematic continuous identification with collective forms, thus, all the more appears to be only an ex-post perspective, linked to an at least partly successful employment stabilisation. Given the described enforcement of individualised coping practices in the face of the current restructuring of labour processes and social patterns of regulation, its future achievement remains an open and uncertain question. The following section, engages in a critical reflection of the encountered majority pattern of participation developed by employees' in relatively stable positions.

### ***9.3 Participation in institutional interest representation 2: Passive participation and lacking cognitive resources***

The majority form of collective agency among the interviewees seems to be a passive, ritualised partaking in institutionalised interest representation. This pattern of collective participation is closely linked to the above introduced practices of separation between micro and macro levels of labour relations and the delegation of responsibilities for collective interest representation to unions and shop stewards as institutional actors. In this, passivity also finds its expression in the perception of institutional collective participation not only as a worker's right, but also as part of his/her duties. In a striking parallel to the concept of labour relations as fair exchange, collective partaking appears as normal, socially expected behaviour - without being necessarily linked to a specific motivation and commitment.

Enactment of these collective rights and duties might be supported by a fair exchange belief. But, such ritualised concepts of collective participation also support the latter's maintenance

by integrating collective agency into its consensual frame of conditional rights and limiting it to the given institutionalised terms and conditions of individual and collective labour relations. Consequently, a high subjective relevance of collective interest representation and support can come along with pronounced strategies of individual conflict solution through one's own direct negotiations with superiors as a first, privileged, and morally valued coping practice. At least for part of the interviewees, collective bargaining is presented as a possibly conflictive, but in the end mutually beneficial process, motivated by common interests in the firm's well-being. Again, this finding points to the contradictory character of employees' collective consciousness: While recognising the importance of collective struggles, the process of collective interest defence gets externalised and/or pacified. In fact, reducing one's own collective participation to a ritualised, normalised form of agency allows perceiving it as a necessity to maintain abstract power positions between external actors, but without translating this argument of power relations into one's own everyday interactions and agency on the shop floor.

The following quote from a permanent part-time sales clerk in firm G is an example of how a strong perception of collective participation as a right is supported by justice claims regarding one's own merit and given availability. It demonstrates how a high subjective relevance of collective interest representation might go along with a passive, delegating concept of collective participation. As can be seen, the latter is motivated by conflict reductions through comparison and relativising - as these are already known from individual coping practices.

*André: This is simply my right, it's my right. If you want to start arguing that I take part in the strikes: ok, that's it, we can stop talking, I won't make all these efforts anymore neither. I will just do my part and that's all. If you start observing whether I go to the assemblies or not, for any reasons you like: No. (...) I don't care for unions' problems. I don't want to create any problems, you know, I don't, I don't want to have to worry. No, at the end I'm fine where I am right now, in the canned food department. I don't ask anything, only would like to pass on to a full-time contract. (...) But, I always go to the assemblies, I go there and listen what they have to say. And if I think it's correct to strike, then I do the strike, otherwise I don't. But I won't go there and tell them: 'It has to be done this and that way.' That's not what I'm interested in. But, you know, most of the times, strikes are done for us young guys who don't have anything, not even any reasonable amount of work hours. It's the unions, the shop stewards here, who finally ensured that I get these additional hours, not the firm. The only way is to rely on them. (...) New forms of struggle for us, for the precarious? I don't know. You should talk to the shop stewards about this, they are more into this (André/permanent part-time contract, sales clerk, firm G).*



In this interview passage, the development of new struggle strategies to overcome temporary employees' lacking collective capacities is exclusively seen as shop stewards' task. No personal ideas or claims are advanced, aside from criticism and pessimism expressed elsewhere regarding unions' bargaining and mobilisation strength. It can also be seen that passive participation and delegation are not equivalent to a blind herding instinct. Instead, there is also an active element here: Participation in strikes is conditional with a person's agreement with strike goals. But, the elaboration and decision of these goals is still perceived as beyond one's own interest and responsibility. The next quote from another permanent part-time sales clerk in the same shop gives a further example of this limited, in itself contradictory concept of collective agency and participation.

*Daniele: The unions do a good and important job. Their work is really, really important. If there was no union, the company would do anything it wants with the worker. (...) The union, that's people who always defend you, who support you if something is not going right with the firm. (...) That's why I decided to become a union member. Because, I know that's the correct, the right thing to do for a worker. Because, in the end, I know that the union is on our side.(...)Talking among colleagues about problems? Well, In the assemblies its like this: the union guys present all the reasons, why we have to strike, all the problems that are there, so we see (Daniele/permanent part-time contract, sales clerk, firm G).*

This passage expresses a high subjective relevance of collective interest defence and support. And again this high subjective relevance goes hand in hand with delegating these function to the unions and shop stewards (during the entire interview, the employee refers to both of these actors as 'unions' without making any distinction). Rather explicitly, the defence of collective interests, from the definition up to the solution of problems, is presented here as the activity of other, apparently autonomous actors defending workers as if from the outside. In contrast, it is never referred to as an issue and a tool of collective self-defence. Consequently, one's own participation (here concerning union membership) appears as a question of the correct, just behaviour of workers rather than as a commitment to active collective struggle. Such delegation could be interpreted as a service attitude towards unions. In this, conflict settlement is the aspired service function. The (only) sphere of conflict, then, seems to be that of institutionalised collective labour relations, with the unions and the company as opponents. This perception entails some analytical capacity: the recognition of the firm as a counter-part and the connection of problems experienced daily with the company's strategies and interests – and not merely as a question of individual character and capacities, located at the level of personal interactions with direct superiors during the daily work process. As could be seen in

the analysis of individual coping practices, personalisation of shop floor relations, and cooperative, friendly interactions with direct superiors, also play an important role for this interviewee. In this case, the other side of the coin of delegating conflicts to the macro level of institutionalised collective labour relations is a pacifying perception of shop floor relations and a separation between both spheres.

This can also be seen later on in the interview when the conversation turns to discussing strike participation. This particular interviewee is one of the few permanent employees that decided not to participate in strikes due to a strongly perceived vulnerability and high dependence on overtime assignments to pay his basic monthly expenses such as the flat. Non-participation is justified by insisting in the coercive, naturalised force of the situation (*'It's destiny'*), and by a passive, powerless self-construction. Moreover, non-participation is supported by practices of personalisation and distinction: It appears as a personal problem (*'But I just can't. That's my problem, a personal problem.'*) linked to the interviewee's specific position and vulnerability as a migrant (having to ensure that his income is sufficient for him and his entire family in the country of origin - in contrast to his young Italian colleagues who still live with their parents). The point here is not to negate this specific vulnerability, but to demonstrate how it is integrated and referred to in employees' meaning constructions in a pacifying way.

However, the interviewee's meaning constructions are ambiguous here. He equally recognises the need to sustain the unions' power position through strike participation. He also values the disruption of the labour process through strikes as important to enhance unions' power positions in collective bargaining. Meanwhile, the limited effect of strikes remains uncontested, especially considering the advance notice that individual strike participants usually give to superiors. The given power relations and conditions of collective interest defence appear as normal and are accepted as the rule of the game. In line with the practices of separation, a peaceful, cooperative, work process oriented perspective is maintained (*'everything gets organised'*) when talking about concrete strike effects at the shop floor level.

Similar to the argument above about employees' notion of a fair exchange, these rather passive, delegating attitudes towards collective interest defence and collective agency do not simply represent an individual inadequateness and incompetence in the development of collective consciousness. Instead, they reflect and result from employees' confrontation with the context conditions of their daily agency. The significance of lacking access to collective institutions due to a management's anti-union pressures was already mentioned as a reason

for individuals distancing themselves from collective agency at least during highly precarious and temporary employment phases. Regarding patterns of passive participation, both the delegation of struggle responsibilities and the separation between cooperative shop floor and conflictive institutional labour relations correspond with the way collective labour relations are effectively organised on both a company and a societal level. To a large extent, these patterns mirror unions' own approaches, internal structures, and strategies.

The existing system of collective labour relations is structurally a system of delegation. The compromise-producing, integrative effects and functions of modern industrial relations have been widely discussed in the literature (for example Hyman 1975). Institutionalisation and the resulting delegation of conflicts to distinct actors, and the structuring of conflicts according to precise rules and predefined processes, constitute important steps in conflict channelling. The latter is based on separating conflict settlements from daily work processes at the shop floor.<sup>252</sup> The overview in chapter four of the historical development in Italian labour relations underlined the political character of such a separation – and its dependence on concrete actors' interests and power positions. Management's current moves towards decentralisation and individualisation of labour relations, including individual conflict settlements being handled in direct interactions with individual employees and superiors, don't represent any counter-tendency here. Instead they constitute strategies of control, consent production, and conflict containment through both precarisation and partial integration of individual employees, and marginalisation of collective actors.

The unions' institutional co-management function is reflected in bureaucracy and a lack of democratic and transparent internal structures. These offer only limited access and influence for 'simple' employees, as well as only limited stimuli and support for collective self-organisation at the shop floor. These structural features are also mirrored in the interviews conducted for this study. Employees strongly differentiate between shop stewards and external unions in their evaluation of institutional collective actors. In line with the detected high subjective relevance of collective support institutions in concrete individual daily conflicts, a shop steward's work is highly valorised by all interviewees who expressed their opinion on these issues. As the following quotes show, external unions, in contrast, are criticised for their distance from shop floor problems, lacking support in shop floor struggles,

---

<sup>252</sup> In the 1970s, Hyman also criticised such a separation within labour sociology as 'reification.' The central point of this criticism is that the typical analysis of industrial relations as relations between abstract collective entities devalues human agency at the shop floor. It tends to reproduce the same boundaries between personal, unstructured and impersonal, structured relations that were found here within employees' common sense.

lacking transparency, and embracing self-interested co-management strategies instead of a more pronounced conflict orientation.

*Mario: This, I never really happened to understand it, the power that the unions have or don't have, and how they decide to move in certain moments. Because, sometimes, I've got the impression that... Well however, they are on our side, but, there are those moments where I just don't understand. Like, well, like why did we have to wait so long, too long for doing that last strike. There were even moments, where we could have done it, to force the firm on its knees, so to say. But, instead, just in that moment, they came to an agreement. No strike anymore, that's it. Well, they made their agreement with the firm, but things are still the same (Mario/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

*Eric: The union officers, they make the agreements with the firm beforehand, in a small round, under the table, hidden. All these union assemblies in the shops, they are just a way to cover up this mechanism. All the important assemblies, they did them only among themselves, there hasn't been any open discussion. (...) It's really a dirty thing. I'm in the union for six months now and in these six months absolutely nothing moved, changed, at the level of work conditions, work times. (...) I guess, somehow the union officers have their pay-off out of this, some little thing to make them happy, a sop. As a union officer, it would be your job to motivate people to fight. But, then, they only invite people to feel resignation, nothing else. (...) Now, by now, the role requested by the union is to make people stay calm. (...) What I thought to do when I became a shop steward, were big struggles. You don't achieve anything doing these mini strikes of two hours (Eric/permanent full-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

From an analytical point of view, these criticisms point to a lack of externally provided resources and support for collective aggregation and conflict agency at the shop floor. Yet, this lack is not (coherently) voiced as such by employees: Claims for collective self-organisation and empowerment are raised only by a small minority. A majority of interviewees has pessimistic opinions about the future development of collective actors' power positions and action potential, and their own role in the production of collective action potential is rarely reflected upon. The fault for a union's lacking power is given to their criticised strategies as well as to the experienced processes of precarisation. While these are important factors, the engagement of individuals in the development of collective agency is another crucial one. This is another example of how employees remain trapped in individualised and personalised coping practices. This is due to an interrelated lack of both available collective resources and their own collective (cognitive) capacities. The following section takes a closer look at these missing capacities.

#### *9.4. Participation in institutional interest representation 3: Individualised concepts of collective support and struggles*

The central lacking collective competence revealed during the interviews is the cognitive capacity to generalise from one's own individual work experience to realise and think in terms of common problems and interests. This does not mean that employees are unaware that others are in the same precarious employment position, be this with regard to colleagues or on a societal level. But, this abstract knowledge does not gain practical relevance within their everyday coping practices. As they talk about their own work experiences, they remain within an individualised, isolated perspective. This starts on the level of individual cognitive coping practices and also concerns a lacking reference to any form of collective. As analysed above, such lacking abilities of generalisation are produced by employees' practices of personalisation in the context of individualised labour relations, and together with their concepts of a fair exchange. The next three sections explore how practices of personalisation and individualisation equally touch upon collective coping practices. For this analysis, more active attitudes towards a collective agency are considered, exceeding the patterns of limited and passive participation in institutionalised interest representation presented so far. This regards, first, employees' reliance on institutionalised collective support in the case of concrete problems, and its individualised perception (9.4). Second, the minority pattern of active participation and struggle attitudes is considered, including personalising criticism of other colleagues' low collective mobilisation (9.5). Finally, the analysis refers to the personalisation of everyday shop floor relations and solidarity between colleagues (9.6).

Using collective support offered by shop stewards and unions in a purposeful, tactical way to solve individually experienced daily problems is a relatively widespread coping practice. Thirteen out of nineteen interviewees mentioned having themselves relied at least once on such support.<sup>253</sup> Yet, in the majority of cases, the collective character of this practice seems to be limited, at least as it is reflected in employees' common sense. A striking example is given by three interviewees in the sample who engaged in legal action against their respective firms Eric/G, Chiara/C1, and Cristina/C1. These legal actions were aimed either at enforcing

---

<sup>253</sup> One of these thirteen interviewees, Valentina, works within a non-unionised shop in firm D, but referred nonetheless to an external union officer for help in terms of moral support, information, and possible future unionisation. Another, Mimmo, is a promoter working for an external interim agency for whom, legally, shop stewards have no say. But again, he searched and obtained support, even if only in the form of information and moral assistance. The remaining six interviewees who did not refer to union support either work in non-unionised shops (Alice/D, Laura/D, Stefania/D), within a unionised environment but in which shop stewards are strongly marginalised and supplemented by an internal conflict settlement body (Marco/D), or the issue did not emerge in their relatively short interviews (Maria/I, Luca/C1).

employees' right to a permanent contract or at obtaining formal recognition for higher qualification and pay levels. They were all undertaken with the support of shop stewards and union advocates, and in two cases, even though the action was being taken by a group and initiated because of a shop steward's proposal, they were still presented in the interviews as individual struggles.

Eric, a cashier in firm G, nearly does not refer to the obtained union support at all. Instead he presents his experience of the legal action for higher qualification and pay as his individual fight against the firm. Only at the very end, the unions appear in his storytelling. Yet, they are seen to play a negative role: They are presented as traitors who would have arranged a hidden compromise with management, which in the end would have caused the trial to fail. Such a negative experience of a union's role might explain the individualised reasoning. Or, the negative evaluation of his union support might serve as a coping practice to externalise responsibility for experienced limited action potential and to alleviate its weight.<sup>254</sup>

Similarly, the two concerned cashiers in shop C1, Chiara and Cristina, present individualised accounts of legal action which, in their case, was undertaken successfully and collectively. In effect, as the following quotes demonstrate, they don't develop their own relevant collective capacities, beyond making use of shop stewards' help in a first place: Neither do they perceive themselves as a collectively acting group, nor do they demonstrate any ambition to transmit their successful struggle experience to other colleagues who are in the same situation today. They do not even have contact to these colleagues or express any interest in their situation. Instead, any solidarity is bound to the own present situation. Such limited solidarity seems to be closely related to these employees' pronounced distinction practices based on their own merit evaluations. Consequently, both of them express strong mistrust and fear about colleagues' hypothetical disapproval of their success in legal action and their now permanent employment positions, which might not appear as merited in terms of work performances (but only forced through legal action) and thus illegitimate, in their colleagues' eyes. Simultaneously to this limited solidarity, interactions with shop stewards are based on personal contacts and relations, and not on any political positioning and analytical reasoning. While this is a crucial access road to collective agency, it still facilitates an individualised perception of collective support institutions.

*Cristina: We all decided together (to engage in legal action), because if we would have done it one by one, for sure we would not have obtained anything. And we decided this after we had heard that we*

---

<sup>254</sup> Unfortunately it was not possible to obtain the concerned union officer's version of the facts to inquire more comprehensively into the concrete circumstances of this failed legal action.

*would all be left at home, after two years of temporary contracts! (...) We didn't have contacts with the union before, but we knew A (the shop steward, UIL) personally, and so we turned to her. She was the one who told us what to do and in which way. (...) Within this group of colleagues, there weren't any relations between us before – and there aren't now. If we were friends before, we are friends now. No, we didn't come any closer to each other, absolutely not (Cristina/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C1).*

*Chiara: We were eight persons who did the trial, me included.(...) Yes, yes, we knew each other before. We were all in the same situation.(...) Well, no, I think solidarity really doesn't exist here. It's everybody on his own. Unfortunately. (...) Honestly, since we got our permanent contracts, we don't pay much attention to these things anymore. Because, you know, we don't live these problems (of temporary contracts) directly anymore. (...) Well, no, the seasonal staff that is there today, we just don't know them. No, we don't talk with them about our experiences with the legal actions to get a permanent contract or other things (Chiara/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C1).*

What is more, in the case of the two cashiers in shop C1, legal action is not even clearly perceived as a struggle between one's own and the firm's interests. In these employees' accounts, the successful trial appears as a final recognition of their merits, and hence, as a realisation of the fair exchange expectations still maintained. Behind this maintained fair exchange belief, even in a situation of effective, legal conflict, lays a corresponding dominance of individual availability strategies in the concerned women's individual coping practices. Such a belief in one's own merits offers a strong legitimization for insisting on one's rights and engaging in legal action. Yet, it only fosters a conditional perception of one's rights and, consequently, a limited struggle consciousness. Again, the latter is sustained by a separation between the firm as an abstract entity and direct superiors as a counterpart in cooperative personalised everyday interactions. Throughout the two interviews, direct superiors are clearly exempted from any responsibility for the initial non-renewal of their contracts. If any responsible person is named at all, this is encouraged by the shop steward who was present during the interview. Fault is then given to management mistakes and personal incapability of a certain higher manager – but not to any firm interest or strategies. Such a limited consciousness of interest differences nourishes the individualised vision of collective conflict experiences to an important extent.

As these examples indicate, the reason for employees' limited (collective) action potential is not simply the discrepancy between their own precarious employment and power positions, on the one hand, and multinational corporations' concentrated, juridical power resources, on

the other, as Artus argued. In his struggle for higher qualifications and pay, Eric effectively had to succumb to the firm's legal power resources, and take refuge in practices of border drawing and withdrawal from work. His example also points to the equally relevant and ambiguous role of unions' strategies for the success or failure of legal actions. As the trial in firm C shows, even in cases of one's own juridical success against the firm, this achievement does not necessarily translate into experiences and development of enlarged collective action potential.

The encountered individualised perception of collective support results at least partly from the character of legal action itself, or more precisely, from the way it is used as a union strategy: As the maximum level of conflict individual employees can engage in with the support of institutional collective actors when it comes to their concrete daily problems. As such, legal action is a representative and individualising practice with a pacifying tendency as it delegates conflict resolutions to union advocates and externalises them from the workplace to the court room.<sup>255</sup> In contrast, a specifically conflictive, participatory, and collective framing would be required to make legal action a collective struggle experience. This would be necessary to counter the dominant insistence in employees' given performances, availability, and merit as the primary legitimisation for legal struggle and justice expectations, even as such an insistence might be tactically necessary in front of a court. Such a moral work ethic can be found not only in employees' common sense, but is part and parcel of unions' cultural heritage.

### *9.5 Participation in institutional interest representation 4: Active participation and collective struggle attitudes*

An important minority of six interviewees (Elena/C2, Cristian/C2, Mimmo/C2, Valentina/D, Eric/G, Luis/I) practices forms of active participation in institutionalised collective interest representation and engages in collective agency as an explicit strategy to counter daily individually experienced fear and impotence. Active participation comprises an active involvement in union activities (such as raising one's own claims in union assemblies), a current or intended future engagement as a shop steward, and/or an active attitude towards collective action on the shop floor, trying to initiate collective struggles or to mobilise

---

<sup>255</sup> A more detailed analysis of unions' and shop stewards' strategy and acting in the cases at hand would be necessary to further sustain such a criticism in this example - all the more as legal action here has effectively been undertaken for a group of employees. Yet, a strong insistence in employees' merits as a legitimising argument, as well as a rather paternalist, representative approach towards legal action as a union-led intervention can be detected from the interview with the concerned shop steward.



colleagues for union initiatives. The following quotes give some examples of such an active collective attitude.

*Mimmo: Yes, yes, I did participate in these two special assemblies about precariousness, which were organised by the shop stewards. And, honestly, I'm not really interested anymore whether the interim agency gets to know that I do these things or not. In the end, I also have to think a bit for myself, I have to get out of this vulnerability in front of the agency! Until some time ago, you know, also my family told me: take care not to create problems, at least you have a job. But now, personally, I really say: Hey, what bullshit, maybe I'll put myself into problems, but there has to be some dignity! If there is something that concerns me, like these assemblies, then I have to participate, I have to overcome that fear (Mimmo/part-time interim worker, promoter, firm C2).*

*Elena: With the strikes, you know, we never ever manage to close down the shop. With my colleagues? No, absolutely not! (laughing) Among 130 cashiers we are really only a few who strike. It's really difficult to convince anybody to participate. I can't tell you why. But, I do talk a lot about this. I have fights about this topic with colleagues! Because, there are those who do twenty hours of overtime and then they complain, because they can't obtain any additional regular hours. Hey, until you don't strike you can't obtain what you want. Sorry, but that's the way it works. (...) But, all this talking doesn't help. It doesn't help at all. It only helps to give you an aversion, because you don't think the same way (Elena/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C2).*

These more actively involved employees clearly express a need to develop their collective strength as a protection against individual vulnerability and as a counterweight against competition among colleagues. This participation is necessary for their own agency and participation in collective struggles to acquire this collective strength. Such collective consciousness comprises a high subjective relevance attributed to (unconditioned) collective rights. It is supported by a conflictive vision of labour relations and pronounced capacities of structural analysis. The latter concerns the mechanisms of precarisation, individual vulnerability, and individualisation. The other way around, all of these (collective) cognitive capacities can gain relevance thanks to interviewees' active concepts of participation.<sup>256</sup>

Important in this seems to be the practice of offensive (but nonetheless precarious) individual negotiation strategies, based on the same conflictive concept of labour relations and a clear perception of the management as holding oppositional interests to one's own. The described

---

<sup>256</sup> The example of Daniele/G shows that being conscious of a need for collective participation and strength alone doesn't necessarily produce active practical collective capacities, but is also present among 'passive participants.'

collective struggle consciousness appears to be fostered by experiences of both limited individual action potential in these offensive negotiations and successful acquisition of effective negotiation, and thus, struggle capacities. Consequently, as for passive participation, collective struggle attitudes also come along in combination with strategies aimed at ‘individual problem solutions first.’ As the above example of Luis and his attempts to collectively confront superiors with claims for better work times shows, negotiation strategies through direct interaction with superiors do not necessarily have to be considered as an individualised practices. Yet, his attempt for collective mobilisation failed due to his colleagues’ fear and lack of participation. The final realisation of his demands was only made possible through a shop steward’s support, who took over the negotiations.

*Luis: No, I did not do this all alone. First, I went to my direct superiors. But they always only told me: we’ll see. Look, you say this for a month, two months. I realised that they didn’t want to move anything. Because, we’ve been three migrants, myself, a guy from Sri Lanka, one from Peru, and an Italian guy, 4 people, you see. It had been only us doing these days in our merchandising department. So, I told the other guys that we should go talk to the superiors. But they didn’t want to, because they were afraid. I went to the superiors, they didn’t give me anything, so I went to the unions. They got really angry with me when I went to the unions. But I don’t care: I talked to you, you didn’t listen, I go to those who protect me. With the unions, the shop stewards here, I managed to get what I wanted. Because, they also used some heavy methods. I don’t know precisely what, but something they’ve told them anyway. All four of us, now, we don’t do 6 days anymore (Luis/permanent part-time contract, stock operator, firm I).*

Despite the conflictive vision of labour relations, interactions with direct superiors might still be marked by personalisation, separation, and delegation. As argued with respect to individual coping practices, the capacity to construct personalised relations with direct superiors here represents a limit (as it potentially produces conflict channelling and sustains separation), as well as an effective resource for coping. Regarding affinities between the here concerned interviewees’ meaning constructions and concepts of passive participation and delegation, Luis again provides a good example: While strongly opting for collective self-organisation and active struggle involvement, he does not know about the content of shop stewards’ negotiation with management, which ultimately produced success in his struggle for better work times. This interviewee also demonstrates a limited active participation in union assemblies. It is restricted to asking question to obtain information, but he does not participate in collective decision processes. The role of shop stewards is seen by this employee in a

clearly representative, delegating perspective as ‘obtaining positive achievements for the workers.’

Inverting the link again between individual and collective coping practices, active collective struggle capacities can be said to sustain individual negotiation practices as well as border drawing and rejection of labour requirements. Yet, they might also go hand in hand with and even support individual availability strategies and adaptive practices, in the sense that these become possible ways of coping only due to the buffering of experiences of individual vulnerability and limited action potential by collective (cognitive and practical) capacities. The example of the permanent part-time cashier Elena (C2) demonstrates how this works: As seen in the quote above, this interviewee clearly displays analytical capacities and collective consciousness in terms of realising collective struggle necessities. These capacities sustain her active engagement in collective agency. And, they also support her reliance on collective support from shop stewards in a conflict with management regarding missing money in her cash desk. Considering the entire interview, this drawing on collective support is also fostered by strong justice expectations resulting from a notion of fair exchange and pride in her own good work performance. Only together with the effective collective support, do these meaning constructions render her daily individual practices of adaptation (namely diverse forms of conflict reduction through naturalisation, comparison, personalisation), as well as limited mental border drawing, possible by making them both sufficiently efficient and supportable. Such daily individual coping is necessary despite the outlined collective capacities as the latter still remain limited on the level of concrete daily shop floor struggles and coping requirements.

Coming back to the production of active collective attitudes themselves, access to collective cultural capital appears to be important for developing confrontational coping practices. For the interviewees considered here, this concerns access to active union activity, either facilitated through respective family histories (Cristian/C2), a particularly involved shop steward in their shops (young employees in firm G), or organisational experiences within external political collectives (Mimmo/C2). Not all employees who make use of the active collective agency as a coping practice explicitly affirm such resources. Active participation and collective struggle attitudes might also go hand in hand with a pronounced criticism of unions and institutionalised collective interest representation. This was the case with Eric’s strong frustration with external unions’ strategies and the limited effects of institutionalised interest representation, despite his own engagement as a shop steward.

Frustration, not necessarily with unions, but above all with their own still limited collective action potential is a widespread phenomenon among the interviewees who express active struggle attitudes. This frustration results from lacking agency and power resources on the shop floor. In these more active interviewees' eyes, such missing collective action potential on the shop floor are first and foremost due to their colleagues' limited readiness to struggle for their own rights.

What is striking in these criticisms is that not much importance is given to colleagues' precarious employment position. Thus, the situation of vulnerability is not accepted as an excuse and even seems not to be much reflected when it comes to colleagues' missing collective agency. This could be interpreted as a positive sign of not submitting to such vulnerability, and for realising that one's own precarious position is a result of power relations and not vice versa. Hence, it can be changed by an altered power balance but this requires a different self-agency. Yet, all these meaning constructions also suggest another example of personalisation. Missing readiness to engage in collective action is attributed to individualistic, egoistic interests and attitudes in moralising ways. These might either be the striving for one's individual career (how modest this might ever be), or on the contrary, in a seeming lack of work ethic. For example, when talking about his strong frustration with both unions' and colleagues' lacking mobilisation for 'big struggles' and with missing solidarity, Eric directly links this to colleagues' disinterest in demonstrating availability and progressing in the job.

A further example of such personalisation can be found in the interview with Valentina with regard to her struggle for holiday payment:

*Valentina: Ah no, it's not enough that I individually win these little battles in order to make colleagues move. No, because, in effect, nobody ever talks. My colleagues are only good in talking behind the back. They also come to ask me for some advice. And I also tell them the minimum things, how to move in front of the firm, how I moved, how I did it. (...) You know, in that moment when I got the holiday payment the whole shop could have opened the mouth. But they've all kept silent. What problem is there? They are all afraid of superiors. I really don't know of what. (...) Well, that's why they (management) can feel so strong in their offices: Because they never had to face any serious revolt, any protest yet. So they simply think that nobody will ever say anything. (...) The others, they all have temporary contracts, management only does these contracts now. They try to employ only very young people, students they prefer, a really focussed strategy. If everybody would be like me, some 30 years old, with family: already starting from 27, things change, attitudes, ideas. But these youngsters with there 20 years, they don't even know how to say anything that makes sense at all. Can you imagine they*

*would know about collective contracts and their rights then?! (...) They are really strange persons (Valentina/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm D).*

The interviewee here recognises the important role of her management's employment strategy. Yet, her colleagues' fear is still not explicitly linked to their precarious employment position although they apparently all have temporary contracts, unlike the interviewee who was just quoted. Instead, the problem she articulates is that of young colleagues lacking intellectual capacities and knowledge, and of a seemingly unreasonable, personal fear, and lacking courage in front of superiors.

Sure, the interviewee has an important point here in underlining that having the courage to participate or not in collective action is a decision every individual has to and can take. But, the reason for most colleagues' inactivity is not their lacking will to engage, which is understood as a character trait or an expression of personal interests. This inactivity is also produced by the current workplace regime and its individualising and precarising effects, as well as by a parallel lack of collective resources of collective aggregation to counter these adverse conditions. Beyond individual colleagues' collective attitudes, there is an effective structural blockage of collective action potential, which constantly reproduces, and at the same time is itself reproduced by, attitudes lacking a desire to struggle. Consequently, there are fewer collective cognitive capacities when individual coping practices are pursued, as described above. Part of this structural blockage is also caused by the management's tactical employment strategy in recruiting relatively young, (collectively) inexperienced staff, which is so forcefully pointed out by the interviewee. In short: withdrawal or non-engagement in collective agency is a - though limited and criticisable - coping practice in the face of missing or inadequate collective resources.<sup>257</sup>

The problem is that not recognising such attitudes as coping practices further reduces the collective capacities of those willing to engage. Frustration with lacking shop floor solidarity produces withdrawal from colleagues and further mobilisation attempts among these employees. It even leads to practices of distinction very similar to adaptive individual coping practices. Such reaction and retreat is clearly linked to lacking available resources of collective organisation within the given work contexts, as well as the consequent experiences of marginalisation, exclusion, and antipathy, which collectively active interviewees are

---

<sup>257</sup> Similarly, in another interview, the lacking mobilisation of colleagues is explained by a self-limiting attitude of comparing one's own situation to others' worse situations. As with an individual coping practice, thanks to such comparison, the given conditions one must endure would always be viewed as a smaller evil compared to other, worse work realities elsewhere. Giuseppe criticises the effect of these comparison attitudes as justifying one's own inactivity and adaptation - though still without recognising their function as coping practices.

exposed to (as stated in the above quote from Elena). But, it is fostered by the described personalising form of critiquing the behaviour of colleagues, which becomes an effective way of channelling the experienced frustration. Consequently, barely any demands emerge from the interviews for concrete additional collective resources, for external support, and/or their own strategies to develop respective capacities of self-organisation at the shop floor. Such practical resources of collective aggregation would be needed to enhance any mobilisation among colleagues: (a) to render alternatives to the (criticised and self-agency limiting) single-sided delegation of interest struggles to institutional actors thinkable and practicable, and (b) to counter fragmentation and lacking capacities of generalisation through concrete collective experiences.

An example for practices of distancing in this context is the insistence in interest differences between colleagues and oneself that can be found in the following interview passages. These obviously have real importance for any attempts of collective mobilisation. Luis refers to his migrant status as a reason for not being able to engage in collective agency and struggles, as this would result in different interests and positions compared to his Italian colleagues. Valentina, in turn, declares that, despite her frustration about their inactivity, colleagues aren't important for her because of age differences and different personal interests.

Such distancing does not necessarily imply complete withdrawal. It can also take the form of restricting social relations at the work place to a very limited group of friends, as can be seen in the following quote. A further aspect of distancing, in the second part of the quote, results from the interviewee's way of perceiving problems of precarisation only on a general level, and only when not concerning her personally (anymore). As a reminder, earlier in the interview, this interviewee stated that part-time work is a voluntary choice for her and most suitable to her family responsibilities.

*Elena: As I've said before, there really is a lot of envy, jealousy here among colleagues. But, you know, we are so many that you can recognise the person you can have confidence in, and those you should better avoid. Then, you form your little group with certain people, and you leave out the others. (...) Now, I have my group of friends here and with them, I know that I can trust them. But then, there are those who, if you tell them something you did, they will immediately go to our superiors to let them know. (...) Precarity? Yes, there is. In my opinion, the young ones that have to find a job always will have more problems. I don't speak about our firm here. Maybe for some firm this might also be comfortable. But, in my opinion all these precarious contracts would have to be cancelled. People need something to be able to maintain themselves. Because, with a contract of twenty hours, a single person just can't handle that*

*situation. You have to be married, you need someone who sustains you, to live from such a contract (Elena /permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C2).*

As this example shows, capacities of generalisation may indicate a non-individualised vision of work conditions that reduce one's own perceived vulnerability and enhance collective conflict capacities. All the same, such generalisation might also serve to externalise and reduce the importance of conflicts for oneself. That is, capacities of generalisation alone are not enough to develop effective collective action potential. In addition, more effective collective experiences, and thus, more concrete organisational capacities to practically intervene on the shop floor and in the personally experienced work conditions, appear as necessary to avoid frustrated distancing for employees, including those who develop active collective attitudes. In a situation where such resources and capacities are lacking, even these interviewees, in the end, come to retreat and delegate concrete struggles to institutionalised forms of collective interest representation rather than engaging in effective collective shop floor agency themselves.

### ***9.6 Collective agency on the shop floor: Personalised and privatised forms of daily solidarity***

So far, this chapter has considered employees' attitudes towards institutionalised forms of collective interest representation and different patterns of participation in the latter. A lack of collective cognitive capacities (of generalisation) and of practical resources for collective aggregation was outlined as the main finding. This section takes a more detailed look at the state of these collective capacities and resources at the level of daily shop floor interactions between colleagues. The central argument here is that social relations and shop floor solidarity take on a high relevance. This occurs not only despite, but is even enhanced by present tendencies of individualisation, competition, and fragmentation. Yet, also on this level, employees' coping practices are marked by strong personalisation.

Relations among colleagues, from the interviews at hand, appear as largely based on personal preferences and interests: They are articulated in terms of personal affinity, character traits, and common life situations, hobbies or other personal interests that are explicitly expressed as private, and not work-related. In contrast, common work experiences and labour positions play nearly no role in employees' accounts. As already suggested in the previous section's

quotes regarding frustrated withdrawal from colleagues, shop floor solidarity, trust relations, and mutual support are limited to restricted friendship groups. These friendships most often exceed the workplace, as leisure activities are also carried out with these chosen colleagues. Placing such importance on personal relations goes hand in hand with the widespread desire for a good workplace atmosphere, as already mentioned. The following quote is only one example of this.

*Giuseppe: Because, we work well together among colleagues. First of all, the group functions well. If there are some obstacles, problems with the work, then differences, conflicts emerge between people. Me, I necessarily look at my department (customer supply) for orientation; the whole macro area (all warehouse functions) is already too big for me. At the end, I'm with my group and I try to stay well there, not to be in a hostile environment, no conflicts, just to have good relations (Giuseppe/permanent part-time contract, stock operator, firm I).*

Across the various interviews, definitions of a 'good' atmosphere comprise wished for, friendly interactions with all actors, superiors included, as well as an interest in cooperation and helping each other, not least in order to ease the work process. Up to now, such requests for a friendly, cooperative atmosphere have been interpreted here mostly as claims for a non-authoritarian, participatory workplace regime, as these emerged in reaction to conflictive experiences of blackmailing and vulnerability. However, such desires for 'good' workplace relations also reflect aspirations in harmonious workplace interactions, as the quote shows. These tend to cover up experienced conflicts rather than answering them with claims for participation. In fact, aspirations in harmony are perfectly in line with the described fair exchange concept and its inherent internalisation of hierarchically set labour requirements. Consequently, interviewees' insistence in and restriction to limited friendship groups then appears as a coping practice of conflict channelling, facing daily lived frustration with bad work conditions, forced availability, lacking recognition, and participation within the work process.

As to the collective action potential, such strong personal relations between colleagues might nonetheless present an important strength. They can be interpreted as a form of coping with or even resistance against both firm culture and competition. Such positive personal relationships value common, private interests instead of firm benefits and corporate culture. This enables employees to bring personal interests into the workplace and maintain a space



for them despite the rationality of profit oriented work processes.<sup>258</sup> For this reason, were presented above as part of employees' practices of border drawing and rejection of management's normative control attempts. Friendship groups can be used as coping communities, offering mutual support in a situation of precarisation and individual vulnerability.<sup>259</sup>

The ambiguous character of personalised shop floor relations also has to be taken into account. On the one hand, such personalisation is no new or specific service related phenomenon. On the other, as on all its other so far analysed levels, personalisation has contradictory effects on employees' action potential. The importance of personal interactions and common private interests among colleagues, both for their daily 'well-being' and as a necessary precondition for developing collective agency and struggle capacities, can be considered a generalisable given. Pialoux's recent study impressively described precarious work conditions in the French car industry (Pialoux 2005). In this study's cases, however, the weight of personal relations can be expected to be even higher due to the ongoing individualisation of labour relations, the expanding introduction of policies of individual voice and corporate identity, and the resulting thrust for highly personalised interactions, both with superiors and within the postulated 'firm-family.' Last but not least, the frontline service character of (most) retail labour and the management imperative of treating 'the customer as king' create an endogenously strong need for personal interactions.

As outlined before, personal relations with direct superiors, as a form of social capital, are important resources for developing individual negotiation capacities. Relating oneself to customers serves as a source of recognition and meaning. Yet, regarding the interactions among colleagues, it has also become evident that individualisation and subjectification of labour relations do not constitute any simple, one-sided opportunities for the development of new forms of social and possibly collective capacities. Instead, they simultaneously entail processes of precarisation, fragmentation, and competition. While daily coping communities in this context might foster new forms of cooperation, these have to be expected to be different from traditional forms of worker solidarity and interest defence - though personal relations among colleagues might always already have been an important basis for the latter.

---

<sup>258</sup> Joining the corporate identity based company collective does not emerge from the interviews as relevant alternative coping practice for such personalised group formation and solidarity development among colleagues. This is less due to direct competition between subgroups (which management tries to enhance by ranking initiatives, but which appear to be of limited relevance in employees' accounts) and more as a result of the mechanism of informal, individualised forced availability. This produces the described experiences of fake firm culture and empty participatory promises. In addition, it results in a need for shielding oneself from excessive labour requirements that management tries to sustain through such corporate identity formation.

<sup>259</sup> In Korczynski's terms, 'coping communities' are forms of informal, daily solidarity interaction by which employees socialise work related problems and conflicts (see chapter 3.4.2).

In fact, regarding collective (struggle) capacities and effective coping functions, the detected friendship groups in the cases at hand remain limited in important aspects.

The personalisation of social relations within these friendship groups is problematic mainly because of the lacking capacities of generalisation and the missing collective experiences it entails. Again, personalisation affects conflict perceptions; it reflects a lacking consciousness of common labour positions; and it seems to sustain individualised coping practices rather than enhancing collective agency. Regarding the first point of personalised conflict perceptions, with the importance of personal affection and antipathies for structuring relations among colleagues, both conflict reasons (in terms of the described criticism of colleagues' lacking mobilisation) and conflict solutions take personalised forms: Within the own friendship group, interactions are based on personal preferences. Beyond this confined space, they are still characterised by cheating and distinction, which further pushes internal competition.

Second, the central problem doesn't stem from personalised relations as such, but from their exclusivity. For a majority of interviewees, social relations with their colleagues appear to be based only on personal likes and 'private' interests (such as hobbies, life situations, age).<sup>260</sup> Simultaneously, work-related issues, problems, and conflicts are not considered as collective issues - but, are still perceived as individual questions. Consequently, common work related interests do not emerge: They are not articulated, searched or struggled about in these friendship groups. In the cases at hand, the latter play only a reduced role as coping communities in the face of concrete daily workplace conflicts. This does not only concern the absence of concrete conflictive collective agency. Even the communication about such issues appears to be limited.<sup>261</sup> The following two interview passages demonstrate this restricted character of friendship groups, and their lacking identity with solidarity networks in the case of work related conflicts and problems.

*Chiara: Yes, yes, there are really good relations with some colleagues. Sometimes we even go out*

---

<sup>260</sup> Regarding the distinction made here between collective agency at the institutional and on the shop floor level, the division line between 'private' and 'work' related interests is not absolute. It only serves to render visible the weaknesses of encountered shop floor relations in term of collective agency. Obviously, seemingly 'private' interests can become of high relevance within the work context as they enter into conflict with the latter's availability requirements. This concerns primarily reproductive duties and care work responsibilities.

<sup>261</sup> A limit here could also lie in the restricted empirical methods used, as these were confined to only interviewing. Participant observations might have revealed more pronounced forms of actual solidarity and mutual support in case of conflicts. Yet, employees' storytelling about these issues, beyond the pure observation of any possible agency, reveals their thinking about shop floor interactions. And in this thinking, collective agency and struggles are given only a very limited relevance - be it as a simple matter of fact and a result of individualised coping practices, or itself as a form of conflict reducing coping with frustrating experiences of lacking collective capacities and continuous individual vulnerability.

*together, we meet also when we are not at work, during our free days. Anyway, we meet each other also outside work. Because, we really have a good relation among each other.*

*Int: And what about solidarity? Would you say there is solidarity among colleagues?*

*Chiara: Well, no. I think solidarity doesn't exist here. It's everybody on his own. Unfortunately.*

*Int: Even though you've said before that there are good personal relations?*

*Chiara: Yes, ok, with these colleagues, yes, maybe there is. But among 100 we are only 5 or 6 with some solidarity then (Chiara/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C1).*

*Int: Do you talk with colleagues about all these problems, like with the temporary contracts?*

*Cristina: I never talked to anybody about these things. Also because, I don't trust anybody, I don't know, but I better not complain about anything. That's my way of doing it (Cristina/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C1).*

The dominant focus of colleagues' friendship bonds could also be interpreted as a partial distancing from any strictly work related community and its possible collective agency and struggles; or, as an escape from work related conflicts into a personalised, privatised enclave, which is constructed within the work context. This limit notwithstanding, friendship groups are perceived by interviewees themselves as a form of effective coping and protection against cheating, mistrust, and jealousy among colleagues. Yet, regarding interactions and conflicts with superiors and firm interests, personalisation is one of the central reasons why employees have a hindered capacity to perceive of any clear counterpart with opposing interests (Ferrerias 2007). This concerns the simultaneous merger and distinction of work and life related interests,<sup>262</sup> as well as the lacking collective perception of work related conflicts, which is entailed in a personalised vision of shop floor relations.

Third, such a limited collective consciousness continuously reproduces and is reproduced by employees' individual coping practices and their resulting individualised understanding of labour relations. Of joint significance (though partly contradictory among each other) here are above all: (a) the just outlined desire for a harmonious workplace atmosphere, together with practices of separation and delegation, the belief in a fair exchange and in one's own dutiful good work performance as a moral conviction; (b) the transfer of conflicts onto colleagues', customers' or superiors' personality traits and the relative practices of distinction; and/or (c) a relative distancing from and limited identification with work as it results from practices of mental border drawing. Finally, the confidence in one's own negotiation capacities serves as a

---

<sup>262</sup> Such a division could also have the contrary effect of underlining interest confrontations between both spheres. Here, it leads to considering life interests as something private to be arranged independently from the work process.

basis not only for direct personal interactions with superiors, but simultaneously, for individualised attitudes towards everyday labour relations.

In the light of these three problematic aspects, colleagues' personalised and privatised friendship groups are integrated nicely into a management's strategies of individualisation, differentiation, and fragmentation. This contradiction was also outlined by Korczynski: On the one hand, "communities of coping are likely to constitute strong informal workgroup cultures which may make workplace relations more difficult for management to control." Yet, on the other, such informal coping communities "may act in a way that is functional to management requirements. By providing a way for service workers to survive the systematic tensions of their working days, 'communities of coping' may help preserve the 'fragile social order' of the service workplace" (Korczynski 2003: 58f).

Artus also points to such a personalisation of workplace relations, especially regarding interactions with superiors. In her interpretation, corporate identity as a company-bound interest community results in a totalitarian ideology, as it fosters such personalisation of labour relations and, at the same time, reduces collective power positions and forces individual integration (Artus 2008). In terms of the cases in this study, it was extensively analysed how employees always appropriate and/or reject part of management's requirements, even if these coping practices might sustain their final consent and adaptation.<sup>263</sup> That is, there is no totalitarian power of management, instead, an active role is required of employees in both reproducing and questioning it.

Finally, on the level of shop floor solidarity, the limited development of collective agency, in terms of enhanced capacities to act and struggle, depends not only on employees' own coping practices and their common sense as being caught within given power relations and ideological calls. Instead, both these aspects also relate to the material power relations at the workplace and the typical problems of collective organising in the sector of precarious service labour described by Artus, and to the individual exhaustion tendencies referred to by Dörre (Dörre 2009, see chapter 3.4.1). The findings presented here sustain the importance of fragmentation processes at the shop floor, as indicated by Artus. In addition, management's strategies of distinction would have to be added as one of the latter's sources.<sup>264</sup> In addition,

---

<sup>263</sup> This ambiguity of employees' coping practices facing management's corporate identity strategies was demonstrated extensively above when arguing about practices of border drawing (see section 8.2.2).

<sup>264</sup> The problems of collective organising named by Artus comprise high levels of individual vulnerability, weak collective power positions due to a management's anti-union pressures, an extreme workforce fragmentation and, last but not least, the merger of workplace relations and personal friendships entailed in corporate identity formation. For Artus, these problems are expressed in a low overall union density within precarious service sectors. Unionisation in Italy is relatively high compared to the rest of Europe, both in Italian large scale retailing and especially in the cases here at hand. But, confronted with traditional Fordist industrial labour, it still remains

as pointed out by Dörre, fragmentation is enforced by employees' continuous and exhausting exposure to precarisation and the resulting lacking (cognitive) capacities of generalisation and collective self-positioning. In consequence, a highly unstable, precarious state of social integration, social cohesion, and given power relations gets stabilised due to a lack of collective action potential.

This exclusively personal and privatised way of relating oneself to colleagues, though reflecting a lot of common sense, is not the only kind of positive, cooperative interaction present in the interviews. In terms of patterns of participation in institutional interest representation, an important minority practices enlarged forms of shop floor solidarity, exceeding close friendship bonds and comprising mutual support in the case of work related problems.

*Elena: It's really, really important to know your colleagues, to talk to everybody. Also because, if I have to do a certain shift and I don't find my usual friends on that shift, well then I have to become friends also with the others, in order to get along, to agree. Otherwise I would feel excluded. That's why I try to, maybe not to be close friends, but at least to know everybody. (...) And then, then we also always try to help each other in case of problems. Especially if I see some colleagues on a seasonal contract, and I see that they have some kind of problem, well, I leave my cash desk for a moment and try to help them for a second. (...) I start from the supposition that me too, once, I was only a seasonal employee. And I still remember the problems I had during that time<sup>265</sup> (Elena /permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm C2).*

Further examples were already mentioned above when presenting employees' practices of border drawing and rejection of labour requirements. Specifically, the different strategies utilised to cover during colleagues' breaks (practiced by André/G, Mario/G, Eric/G, Valentina/D), should be recalled here. Or, the agency worker's rejection of control over his extra work tasks within the shop, which he considers a help for colleagues (Mimmo/C2). The first of the final quotes provided equally demonstrates such a potential for collective agency and active participation that lies in shop floor solidarity. The other, in contrast, once again underlines the limits of actually gained collective action potential also on the level of shop floor agency - if these capacities do not exceed verbal complaints within the given hierarchy

---

low. The described problems of fragmentation can also be traced in this context, contributing to the state of lacking capacities of collective aggregation.

<sup>265</sup> The quote continues as follows: "(...) But, not everybody does it like this. I think it's a question of character." It simultaneously points to the interviewee's daily experiences of solidarity and a personalising rationality that reduces the prospects of future struggles and achieve enhanced collective capacities to act.

and are not sustained by necessary resources and capacities of active, collective resistance, and rejection of encountered requirements.

*Mario: Some months ago, there were elections for the shop stewards in our shop. If I could go back in time, I would present myself as a candidate, too. Because I would like to try a bit.... And than, above all, seeing the situation as it is, I could give a hand and maybe make some colleagues understand, too, what the situation is like. Because, because in everyday work there really is some solidarity between the colleagues and me. So, I really would like to try and do that (Mario/permanent part-time contract, cashier, firm G).*

*Stefania: Yes, of course, there is daily solidarity and cooperation. Besides for these two people I mentioned before.<sup>266</sup> Besides for them, there is no competition. We change turns, help each other in the work. (...) We also talk about problems we might have, with the new superior and the way he organises our work times, for example. The only thing is that this talking doesn't help. It seems like there isn't much that can be done to solve that problem. It's even already been presented to the superiors, on a higher level (Stefania/permanent part-time contract, sales clerk, firm D).*

All these examples point to the fact that personalised interactions and enlarged shop floor solidarity are no necessary contradiction, but might support each other - as long as work-related issues remain one common reference point. That is, as long as employees' possess some collective conflict consciousness, as well as the necessary resources to enact such generalised solidarity. Or, as long as they resist the pressures of individualisation, forced availability, and individual vulnerability, as well as the convenience of respective individualistic coping practices.

## 9.7 Conclusion

In summarising this chapter's argument and findings, this conclusion consists of two parts. First, it considers the distribution of different collective coping patterns across employees and firms. Second, it refers to the social conditionality of collective capacities and their (lacking) development.

---

<sup>266</sup> The interviewee here refers to two colleagues who are competing to become department heads and consequently, in her opinion, put everybody under pressure with their infinite availability expectations.

### 9.7.1 Distribution of coping patterns

Condensing and comparing the different patterns and levels of collective participation and agency described in this chapter, the main common characteristic detected is that of a personalisation of social relations, conflict experiences, and solutions. Such personalisation goes hand in hand with an equally generalised and combined, simultaneous reliance on both individual availability strategies and collective support. On the one hand, development of collective attitudes is enhanced and justified by employees' strong frustration about lacking results of individual availability strategies. On the other, it is equally supported by a continuous confidence in these very same availability strategies, or more precisely, in their underlying justice concepts. Such a belief enables interviewees to reduce the degree of perceived vulnerability. It also eases reliance on collective actors against a management's anti-union pressures. The other way around, individual coping practices and the faith placed in them, for all interviewees, are to some extent sustained by different kinds of collective coping practices and support - be this only the mutual moral encouragement within friendship groups or advice and information obtained from shop stewards in case of conflicts.

In addition to these general traits, differences were discovered regarding the degree of active agency and collective struggle consciousness that the described collective coping practices are associated with. Summing up, and in bringing together both levels of institutional interest representation and shop floor agency, four patterns of collective coping can be distinguished. As derived from the conducted interviews, the following brief overview relates the collective patterns to the different forms of individual coping that each is combined with.

First, there is a set of severely limited collective coping practices. These include avoidance of participation in institutional interest participation as well as reducing social relations with colleagues to strongly personalised friendship groups. Such restricted collective practices occur in combination with individual practices of 'happy integration' and/or limited mental border drawing.

Second and third, two different forms of passive participation can be distinguished. The latter, either goes hand in hand with the described forms of individualised experiences of collective support and delegated interest representation, and is again combined with clearly limited and only personal shop floor relations. Alternatively, passive participation and delegation are nonetheless combined with a clearly expressed consciousness of collective struggle necessities, although this is not reflected in one's own agency. In the first case, these passive collective coping practices go together with all diverse forms of individual coping, conflictive

negotiation excluded. In the second case, the tension between one's own agency and cognitive analysis is met with individual practices of border drawing, including forms of personal strike and (emotional) withdrawal from work.

Finally, active struggle attitudes, referring to one's own active engagement in shaping union activities, mobilising colleagues, and practices of enlarged shop floor solidarity merge together with individual coping practices of conflictive negotiation and border drawing.

As for individual coping practices, these patterns refer to varying forms of coping, not to employee types. Individual employees might use practices drawing from different patterns in different situations and conflicts. Namely, employees using active struggle attitudes might also display notions of passive participation or personalised shop floor relations. In other words, there is a 'cumulative' distribution of coping patterns across employees. This is displayed in the table below.

*Table 16: Combinations of individual and collective coping patterns*

	<b>Happy integration</b>	<b>+ Mental border drawing</b>	<b>+ Personal strike</b>	<b>+ Conflictive negotiation</b>
<b>No participation + personalised shop floor relations</b>	Alice/D Maria/I	Laura/D Gianni/I		
<b>Passive participation/delegation + individualised attitude</b>	Chiara/C1 Cristina/C1	Daniele/G	Marco/D	
<b>Passive participation/delegation + collective struggle consciousness</b>			Giuseppe/I André/G Mario/G	
<b>Active struggle attitude</b>		Elena/C2	Cristian/C2	Valentina/D Stefania/D Luis/I Mimmo/C2
<b>Not known</b>	Chiara/C1			



As for individual coping practices that help active collective struggle attitudes to develop, first of all, a conflictive understanding of the labour relation is central. This comes along with strong, encompassing conflict experiences regarding both the (lacking) limits of labour requirements and issues of participation, responsibility, and autonomy in the work process. Characteristic for non-participation in collective activities, as well as for individual passive participation and restricted only personal shop floor agency, in contrast, is the concerned employees' relative integration (into the firm hierarchy) and their belief in a fair exchange. This comes together with overall limited conflict experiences, focussed on recognition and participation within the work process.

*Table 17: Combinations of conflict experiences and collective coping patterns*

	<b>No participation + personalised shop floor relations</b>	<b>Passive participation or delegation + individualised attitude</b>	<b>Passive participation or delegation + collective struggle consciousness</b>	<b>Active struggle attitude</b>	<b>Not known</b>
<b>Limited conflict experiences</b>	Maria/I Gianni/I	Chiara/C1			Luca/C1
<b>Conflictive in terms of participation</b>	Laura/D Alice/D	Marco/D		Stefania/D	
<b>Conflictive in terms of participation and/or direct control and forced availability</b>		Daniele/G	Giuseppe/I André/2 Mario/G	Valentina/D Luis/I Elena/C2 Cristian/C2 Mimmo/C2 Eric/G	

Similarly, in Artus' study on collective labour relations in precarious retail labour, employees who engage in collective agency and struggles are those who have nothing to lose due to their high levels of frustration with their current labour situation. Moreover, such activists

distinguish themselves by their positive self-evaluations of their own qualifications and labour market positions, and/or by motivating their collective agency with strong immaterial value orientations (such as justice, solidarity, dignity). Regarding the interviews here at hand, the perspective shifts slightly. As argued with regard to the distribution of individual coping practices, the degree of conflict experiences and frustration, as well as the individual positioning with regard to the internal and external labour market, are an important, necessary precondition for being able to reduce one's own perceived vulnerability and to develop active (individual) struggle attitudes. But, this does not necessarily result in any appropriation of collective action potential. In addition, access to collective resources are seen as central here, both on a practical and a cognitive level.

In Artus' terms, activists' strong value orientations could be interpreted as indicating the relevance of cognitive collective resources. However, in the light of the here presented interviews, a specification is necessary: Value orientations here appear most prominently in the form of moral convictions sustaining fair exchange concepts and respective justice expectations. As extensively argued so far, they foster rather individualised, adaptive coping practices and reduced collective capacities. For the development of active collective coping practices, in contrast, the mentioned conflictive and collective perception of labour relations (that is, the consciousness of interest conflicts and the collective character of labour positions and experienced conflicts) appear as more relevant than such moral orientations. Besides these cognitive collective and analytical capacities, ethical rather than moral values appear as significant: This includes the right to a self-determination, the rejection of exploitation in the form of unlimited labour requirements, as well as the legitimacy of one's own interests and struggles resulting from them.

As indicated, access to a collective cultural heritage prove to be an important factor in the development of such collective capacities and ethical orientations. That is, cognitive collective capacities appear to depend to a crucial extent on processes of socialisation and practical collective experiences both in and outside of the workplace. In fact, these constitute important learning processes in which subjects develop and routinise their coping practices and action potential through confrontation with their social conditions of existence, the respective power relations and resulting opportunities and requirements of acting and thinking, their internalisation and contestation.<sup>267</sup>

---

<sup>267</sup> It would go too far to include an analysis of how cognitive collective capacities are produced in the first place and on a societal scale, what their different alternative production processes are under concrete historical conditions and with respect to specific subject positions. It is of sufficient interest here to state and recognise the importance of these capacities, as well as their being favoured, among others, by access to a collective cultural heritage.

### 9.7.2 Lacking collective capacities and their social conditioning

Turning attention to the social conditioning of limited collective action potential, again, important parallels and intersections between individual and collective practices are visible. First, similar to the individual coping practice of sticking to fair exchange expectations that are contradicted daily, employees' common sense also proved to be highly contradictory on a collective level. The ambiguity of the combined individual availability and collective support strategies, which was detected among interviewees, lies in the fact that a majority of employees complain about precarising limits of individual coping practices and, therefore, place importance on collective support or even criticise lacking collective capacities to act. At the same time, they maintain strongly individualised meaning constructions and only develop their own reduced collective conflict perceptions and agency. That is, a perceived limit of both individual availability strategies and collective action potential is met with more individualisation.

Second, central expressions of these individualised, cognitive coping practices are the personalisation and privatisation of social relations, as well as the individualised attitude towards collective interest representation and support. As this chapter has demonstrated clearly, such individualised, personalised, and privatised forms of coping go hand in hand with severally limited collective capacities. On a cognitive level, this concerns a lack of capacities of generalisation, structural analysis, and conflict awareness. In practical terms, lacking collective capacities are expressed in employees' overall limited engagement in their own collective agency, their reduced capacities of shop floor organisation, collective conflict perception, interest articulation, and active struggle.

Parallel to the detected generalised processes of precarisation and the limited relevance of all individual coping practices in terms of gained disposal over work and living conditions (even in case of conflictive coping practices), such lacking collective action potential results in a generalised, though gradual, phenomenon that touches upon the workforce as a whole. A lack of collective capacities was detected for practices of passive participation and personalisation of shop floor relations, especially regarding missing cognitive capacities of generalisation and active struggle attitudes. Collective capacities are also limited in their effects in the case of active participation and enlarged shop floor solidarity. This is demonstrated most clearly by interviewees' frustration with the limited scope and effect of collective struggles: with unions little conflictive and non-transparent co-management strategies, colleagues' lacking mobilisation, as well as their own experiences of marginalisation. In addition, the limited

degree of gained action potential is also expressed by the personalising meaning constructions that employees use to explain even these collective frustrations.

Third, such limited cognitive capacities and incoherent common sense are no expression of any assumed 'false consciousness.' Instead, they are an effect of ritualised, incorporated coping practices, developed in response to specific historical social conditions of work and living, of acting and thinking. Therewith, they relate to the only limited available collective resources and employees' disadvantaged individual power positions in the face of individualised, informalised patterns of labour control and work organisation. As demonstrated, the latter is problematic for any form of collective agency especially as it results in increased fragmentation and performance pressures, and hence fosters competition and cheating among colleagues. This lack of available collective resources and power positions on the shop floor is mirrored and increased at the level of collective labour relations by the indicated structural organisational problems and union weaknesses, as these are expressed in the relatively low level of workforce mobilisation for collective action (in a comparison of the sector), in management's strong and effective anti-union pressures and evasion strategies, and further intensified under the individualising, informalising, precarising, and fragmenting regime of subjectified Taylorism and repressive integration. Finally, as indicated above, the unions' own structures have to be added as a further source of structural problems, mostly their hierarchical and bureaucratic organisation as well as their co-management oriented strategies and functions.

Yet, as argued throughout this chapter, the detected individualised, personalised, and privatised forms of coping themselves do not only reflect limited available collective resources, power positions, and capacities to act, but also constantly re-create these shortages. As a result, employees appear trapped in individualised labour relations. In this, lacking collective and individual action potential are closely interrelated, and mutually producing and reproducing each other. For, the necessity to gain action potential within a context of individualisation and precarisation constantly pushes employees towards individualised coping practices and meaning constructions, and thus, limits any possibilities to appropriate collective capacities. However, employees' individual vulnerability and their limited action potential are caused by the lack of collective resources and capacities. Precarisation, individualisation, and lacking collective capacities are not simply the reason for, but in a first instance, an expression of employees' weakness and employers' strength within a changed balance of societal and workplace power positions.

Consequently, and complementary, as coping practices, and thus, as reactions to such changed power balances, personalisation and privatisation, individualisation, and fragmentations within employees' common sense cannot be interpreted as indicating any general change from collective to individualistic values. Instead, the data presented here clearly points to a continuous subjective relevance of collective agency and collective interest representation.

Dubet et al's detailed study on subjective work experiences, in contrast, is a current example of how the idea of change and pluralisation of social value systems and justice expectations influences labour analysis.<sup>268</sup> The authors insist in employees' individualised interest orientations focussed on moral concepts of the good life, and in the loss of collective action potential. The problem with this argument is that the authors simply explain these individualistic and moralistic orientations with a pluralised, polyarchic, dissociated, and consequently contradictory character of work experiences and justice expectations themselves. Yet, both contradictions and individualised meaning constructions within employees' common sense are the expression and consequence of social trends of individualisation and fragmentation, respective requirements for acting and thinking, and specific coping practices producing only limited action potential. In this, individualisation, personalisation, and privatisation are only one possible, though the socially dominant, form of coping (which is induced and conditioned by neoliberal hegemony) - but not a necessary one. With regard to the development of enlarged collective action potential, the central shortcoming of both such contradictory and individualised common sense, as well as Dubet et al's analysis, is that they do not reflect collective interest positions and conflicts. In fact, what is described by Dubet as a self-centred orientation towards moral concepts of the good life can be analysed more comprehensively not only as a trend towards individualisation and personalisation, but also as depoliticised attempts to realise desires of self-realisation (Krauss 1996). In other words, the limit of Dubet et al's work lies in the fact that it misses a critical analysis of subjects' meaning constructions, their social conditionality, as well as their inherent un-naming of social structures, processes, and power relations. Processes of socio-structural fragmentation, thus, remain invisible as inherent in the development of a capitalist society. They feature neither as a source of practical individual vulnerability or as a lack of cognitive collective capacities.<sup>269</sup>

---

<sup>268</sup> Such an argument is central to the debate on individualisation (see for example Beck 1986). According to this debate, the post-modern era would be characterised by an increasing dominance of value orientations originating from the life sphere and a complementary loss of importance for work-related values and respective collective orientations. Different from this main line of argument, in Dubet et al's study, the indicated value change is developed as an outcome of the work process and employees' daily work experiences, and not located as an external factor in the life-sphere.

<sup>269</sup> As argued in chapter eight for the concept of a fair exchange and employees' practices of distinction, fragmentation, individualisation, and lacking capacities of generalisation within subjects' common sense -

Yet, it would be precisely these subjects' meaning constructions that would have to be acted upon to enhance employees' collective capacities to act, and thus, their participation and disposal over the work process and work conditions. Crucially, employees' limited collective coping practices, in conjunction with the outlined structural organisational problems, produce a general, daily shortage of collective experiences on the shop floor, and even more so of concrete offensive and successful collective struggle experiences. In explaining this, the present analysis most strongly points to a lack of cognitive resources. Less pressing in employees' accounts, instead, seems to be the lack of material resources for collective aggregation.<sup>270</sup> Yet, as extensively argued so far, both levels are , strongly interrelated. Thus, limited mention of lacking material resources within the interviews can also be considered an effect and expression of lacking cognitive capacities and respective meaning constructions. Or, voicing a lack of concrete collective resources presupposes recognition of collective agency as an option for coping in the first place. The other way around, cognitive capacities are crucially appropriated through experiences of concrete collective agency. Coming back to the argument of how to enhance employees' action potential, it has to be underlined again that their development is a learning process, which depends both on the availability of collective resources and agency opportunities and on subjects' own active practices of appropriation. That is, it requires contradictions within common sense to be named, confronted, and acted upon by subjects themselves. Yet, given the scarcity of collective resources on the shop floor, such a confrontation can and has to be sustained externally in order to enhance access to collective resources, encourage the development of collective capacities and experiences, and thus, inspire alternative ways of acting and thinking.

---

though only through a complex set of historically specific connecting factors and processes with contingent, subject-bound outcomes - can be linked to the commodity shape of social relations in capitalism and the therewith linked separations between different social spheres, actors, and interests - namely between economic and political spheres of struggle, but also between exchange and use values, production, and distribution processes, or private and public spheres.

<sup>270</sup> As introduced above, Ferreras' study on supermarket cashiers describes lacking time and money, opportunities to share and render conflicts visible, or to meet and communicate as central missing resources of active collective aggregation on the shop floor. In the interviews here at hand, in contrast, the only direct mention of lacking practical resources of aggregation concerns access to the institutions of collective interest representation during temporary employment. The problem of diversified, fragmented work times is not underlined as a problem by the interviewees. This stands in contrast to shop stewards' strong preoccupation about this process, which, in their eyes, produces an important loss of cohesion. Most employees, instead, insist in being able to get to know and relate to their colleagues, in the selective ways described above in constructing deep, but restricted friendship networks, while also practicing very limited work-related interactions with everybody.

## 10. Conclusion

In the following, first of all, a summary of the pursued research questions, the theoretical approach, and the main empirical findings of this research are provided (10.1). This summary revisits the different levels of analysis that were addressed. It thus insists (a) in the current development of management's strategies of flexibilisation and subjectified labour control, (b) in employees' diverse, multilevel experiences of flexibilisation, participation, and precarisation, as well as (c) their coping practices in the face of daily lived conflicts. With regard to this latter aspect, particular attention is paid to the empirically determined limits of gained action potential. Finally, the analysed differences in conflict experiences and coping practices, and their distribution across employees, are considered.

Very briefly, these main findings are as follows: First, management strategies of flexibilisation and precarisation, as well as direct and indirect control, work together and combine into a mechanism of forced availability. Second, on this backdrop, experiences of precarisation take a generalised, though gradual form, which results particularly from the informal, individualised character of flexibility regulations (and the unlimited labour requirements produced by the mechanism of forced availability). Moreover, experiences of precarisation are generated by only indirectly flexibility related aspects, such as the intensification of labour processes, the fake character of management's promises of participation, recognition, and professional growth, as well as the loss of collective norms and/or one's own control over work conditions. Third, regarding employees' coping practices, particularly their contradiction-balancing function, the contradictory mix of adaptive and conflictive strategies, and the limited gained action potential stand out. Collective action potential is, thus, severely limited due to lacking collective experiences of everyday work and struggles, and equally lacking cognitive capacities of generalisation. Finally, variations in the distribution of different conflict experiences and coping practices can, above all, be linked to employees' employment histories, their relative satisfaction or dissatisfaction with current employment positions and/or the degree of still maintained hopes in future professional growth, as well as the degree of currently perceived vulnerability, the availability of collective resources and the specific focus of management's selective normative control strategies on particular employee groups.

Beyond this summary, in the second step, an outlook is developed providing ideas of how to enhance employees' action potential (10.2). More precisely, the question at stake in this final part is how collective aggregation and conflict strategies might be developed in the face of the

disguised lacking collective resources and capacities, but also in light of the existing individual and collective coping practices. Obviously, this question can be approached here only in a tentative manner. The following is to be considered as a proposal for further discussion and research; or, as an attempt to raise questions that would require not least a collective process of confrontation and exchange in order to be answered.

To start this discussion, and to give it a practical anchoring, an effort is made to look beyond the specific case studies within large scale retailing undertaken here and to ask for input from interesting collective experiences existing in other spheres of Milanese service labour. In the perspective of both future research and collective agency, such a wider view can be helpful to search for possible common positions, common conflicts and strategies across the mass of different, fragmented experiences of precarisation. Concretely speaking, references are made to the network Intelligence Precaria and its Punto San Precario<sup>271</sup>. These initiatives are questioned as to their relevance with regard to the specific conflicts and problems encountered in large scale retailing. Such a confrontation appears as particularly interesting as there is a common insistence in the need to foster employees' conflict capacities, to increase collective action potential and to question hegemonic common sense patterns or cultural frames.

### ***10.1 Summary: Flexibilisation and control, conflicts and coping in large scale retailing***

Three sets of research questions were addressed in this study: First, how do flexibilisation and subjectification operate in large scale retailing, as an example for a frontline service labour with low formal qualification levels? How do employment structures, work organisation, and labour control develop, and how do flexibilisation, precarisation, as well as direct and indirect forms of labour control interact? Second, how do employees experience the resulting work and employment conditions? What problems and conflicts do they experience in their everyday work realities? How do these relate to the issue of precarisation, and how are different experiences of precarisation distributed across different employee groups? Third, what kind of coping practices do employees develop in the face of the labour requirements, problems and conflicts that they encounter? How do they make sense of and deal with growing flexibilisation, intensified work rhythms and control, normative regulation, and

---

<sup>271</sup> As introduced in chapter four, the collective of Intelligence Precaria was born in one of Milan's social centres in the context and follow-up of the Mayday Parades, the 1<sup>st</sup> of May demonstrations of precarious people. It involves a variety of precarious workers especially in the service sector (from fashion to theatre, from call centres to social services, from retailing to academic research, etc.).



participatory offers? How do their coping practices contribute to the realisation or questioning of labour control? And, last but not least, how do employees gain action potential, how and to which degree do they become capable of influencing their work conditions, defending their rights, and realising their own interests and aspirations within the labour process?

The empirical ground for this investigation was the field of large scale retailing in the Italian city of Milan. This empirical setting was chosen as an example of the most advanced retail modernisation in the Italian context, and as a context marked by particularly strong pressures of change. Aside from the late but quick modernisation and liberalisation of the retail industry, such pressures of change also stem from the recent important flexibilisation of Italian labour markets and the latter's limited social buffering within the family-oriented Italian welfare regime.

On the analytical level, these questions were motivated by an interest in the functioning of labour control, the way and extent to which consent is produced in degrading work conditions and/or increased labour requirements, and/or how (open) conflict emerges. Following labour process theory, labour control is conceived here as necessarily passing through a mix of coercion and consent production, and thus, as always already open to conflict and an outcome of struggles between competing interests, aspirations and needs, which employers and employees bring to the workplace. Consequently, as an outcome of consent production, control has to pass through the employees themselves, through their subjectivities, and must be enacted by their own everyday practices.

In the terms of critical psychology, such everyday practices can be conceptualised as coping practices in the face of multiple, contradictory social requirements of acting and thinking. Coping practices are based on and generate subjective, socially grounded reasons for agency that condense in a subject's common sense. As the social world is seen to be marked by contradictions, competing demands and interest differences, and as a subject's positions and self-positionings within this social world are multiple and fragmented, common sense also has to be expected to reflect these contradictions and fragmentations. This incoherent character of common sense enables subjects to act within a given social context, to balance and bear the latter's contradictions. But, it simultaneously limits their capacities to engage in any change producing agency, to enter into open conflicts, and to increase their own disposal over their living conditions. At the same time, the daily experienced contradictions, their maintenance within a subject's common sense and the resulting limited character of any gained action potential can constitute potential breakpoints: moments, topics, and occasions in which routine forms of acting and thinking break open and conflict becomes visible and necessary.

Combining the categories of coping practices and action potential from critical psychology with a discourse analytical approach, it has been possible here to critically investigate such employees' common sense and to locate it within the concrete work contexts and labour requirements that they face. This means discerning employees' constructions of meanings as part of their daily labour agency, and to highlight the latter's contribution to workplace consent and/or contestation, as well as to the acquisition of restricted or enlarged action potential. Crucially, the proposed comprehensive subject-, contradiction-, and practice-oriented focus makes visible the mentioned limits and barriers, contradictions, and possible breakpoints within employees' daily acting and thinking, where this leads to a balancing rather than an actual solution of experienced problems and contradictions. In other words, it can reveal possible conditions of enhancing employees' action potential.

Always on the backdrop of this subject-oriented and contradiction-focussed search for coping practices and action potential, a further analytical interest in this study was understanding differences in everyday work experiences, conflicts, and coping practices as they emerge between and across different employee groups. In this, the main focus was on distinguishing different, though interrelated fields of conflict and respective forms of coping - and not to construct different employee-types. Correspondingly, regarding the distribution of different conflict experiences and coping practices across employees, the aim was to inquire into the context-bound intertwinement of multiple influencing factors and to highlight their interaction, rather than singling out isolated causal variables.

Regarding the further referred-to subject-theoretical approaches and concepts from Schuetz, Bourdieu, Foucault, and Hall, the first author's concept of relevance structures was particularly helpful to systematise employees' constructions of meaning and to draw attention to subjects' practices of producing unquestionable visions of the social world. Similarly, regarding Bourdieu's concept of habitus, not only the strength and persistence of routine patterns of acting and thinking, but also the energies and coping practices employed to maintain these routines against contrary, contradicting everyday experiences are evident.<sup>272</sup> Foucault's and Hall's concepts of subjectivity, in turn, offered a decisive basis for perceiving employees' active stance in the production and reproduction of power and consent within the labour process, instead of any passive internalisation. More precisely, they allowed for rendering visible the contradiction-balancing effect of employees' coping practices. Beyond

---

<sup>272</sup> The corporal, physical manifestations of a subject's habitus – forcefully insisted in by Bourdieu – have remained on open point for further investigation. First, body-related aspects of the work process emerged only to a very limited extent from employees' narrations. Second, because the analytical focus was placed on the contradictory character of cognitive and practical coping practices and their emergence rather than on their incorporated, bodily forms and effects.

the production of an unquestionable reality, especially relevant in this proved to be what Hall conceptualises as subjects' capacities of dislocation and deference of social meanings – and which has been analysed here as coping practices of appropriation of meaning.

Referring to the proposed enrichment of labour process theory by a sensuous, practice-related concept of labour capacities, this has sustained the micro focus on employees' own narrations about their daily work practices, particularly for analysing labour control. Among others, this in-depth investigation has drawn attention to the fact that processes of subjectification and flexibilisation are not completely new phenomena. Instead, they also entail classical forms of labour intensification and respective 'old' conflicts. Concerning the holistic character of a sensuous concept of labour, the resulting, theoretically claimed relevance of subjects' whole life activities for labour experiences seems to be in contrast to the strong empirical and analytical focus on labour processes related issues presented here. Yet, this focus does not simply result from necessary selections in the arrangement of temporarily restricted interviews, but it also emerged as an empirical outcome: Conflicts regarding the work-life balance were only rarely voiced in employees' spontaneous narrations. Un-naming and reducing the relevance of one's own life-related interests, in confrontation with labour requirements, proved to be an important coping practice that effectively conceals more extensive effects of precarisation concerning the entire life.

Having reviewed the theoretical setting, a summary of the empirical outcomes is now presented. First, the development of management strategies of flexibilisation and labour control in Milanese large scale retailing is addressed (chapter six). Second, attention turns to employees' everyday experiences, and their individual and collective coping practices. Finally, the distribution of different conflict experiences and coping practices across employees is considered.

Milanese large scale retailing is marked by high levels of labour flexibilisation. This is the case especially for work hours and times. Part-time contracts and an informal, individualised regulation of flexible work times within the daily labour process represent the central patterns of flexibilisation. Labour control is characterised by a mix of indirect and direct forms of control, including also subjectified forms of hierarchical supervision (ex: hidden supervision). The result is a mechanism of blackmailing and forced availability. Besides the individualisation and informalisation of labour relations and the promises and requirements of participation and self-regulation linked to normative control, processes of precarisation and consequent vulnerability are constitutive of this form of control. That is, being based on

blackmailing (and thus on a high degree of violence, coercion and invasive control) does not mean that labour control relies only on forced submission. Instead, the analysis of employees' daily work experiences has shown how, also in this case, it works through coercion and consent production alike, and hence, also through partial integration of employees' intrinsic interests in self-control, participation, and recognition (chapter seven).

As chapter seven has demonstrated, individual conflict experiences within the labour process centre on both the negative effects of coercive pressures and the limits of actual interest integration: First, this regards the unlimited, unsustainable nature of labour requirements induced by the control mechanism of forced availability. The second central field of conflict results from the fake character of management's participatory promises, as the fake, limited character of possible participation contrasts sharply with employees' own claims and desires for involvement and recognition.

Experiences of precarisation, in this, are generated by a mix of contractual, temporal, and functional flexibilisation, especially in their informal forms, as these provoke insecurity of current work conditions, incomes, and daily work-life balances, of future professional development and life course planning, and a loss of collective norms and rights (particularly regarding the limits of labour requirements and the conditions of professional growth and employment stabilisation). However, these experiences of precarisation are closely bound up with only indirectly flexibility-related, supposedly 'old' forms of labour intensification (increasing work load and rhythms, reduced break times, and extended work times). Moreover, they strongly relate to supposedly 'new,' individualising forms of responsabilisation and subjectification. For, the latter sustain the mechanism of blackmailing by producing constant requirements of self-activation and unlimited availability, by rendering the payoff of respective individual availability demonstrations uncertain, and by offering only limited resources and opportunities of participation (be it as responsible firm actors within the labour process, or in terms of professional growth, income, and employment stabilisation).

All of these different experiences of precarisation, in fact, are produced by the same, articulated mechanism of forced availability, in which management strategies of flexibilisation, subjectification, authoritarian control, and precarisation combine. In employees' subjective experiences, precarisation, thus, effectively results in a generalised, though gradual, process touching not only upon a large variety of aspects, but also upon the entire workforce, far beyond the distinction of stable or temporary contracts. Central for such experiences is not any objective, absolute degree of insecurity and instability (nor any increase of flexibility as such), but the subjective perception of growing vulnerability and a

relative loss of one's own control, collective norms, and security. Consequently, the key experience of precarisation is not linked to temporary contracts, which are experienced as highly precarious, but are often accepted as a transition period. Instead, it results from being blocked in permanent but still unsustainable, insufficient part-time positions, and/or low qualification and pay levels, and from continuously being exposed to the mechanism of forced availability, to unlimited labour, and/or flexibility requirements, to blackmailing and fake promises of participation, professional growth, and performance justice. Similarly to precarisation, processes of subjectification and intrinsic interests in participation take a generalised form as they touch upon all considered groups of employees. In fact, both conflict levels of unlimited labour requirements and lacking real participation are closely linked by employees' desires and needs for their own control over work and living conditions.

Looking at how employees cope with these various conflict fields and experiences of precarisation, the main analytical focus of chapter eight concerned how different common sense patterns sustain more or less conflictive coping practices and different degrees of concrete action potential. One central outcome on this level of analysis is the interlinked and ambiguous character and the cumulative distribution of the different practices of adaptation, appropriation, boundary drawing, and conflictive negotiation. That is, instead of any dualism between more or less adaptive and conflictive coping practices, these are interwoven: They mix in contradictory ways in employees' common sense and daily practices. In fact, all employees develop some forms of adaptive coping and some practices of appropriation. Those that limit themselves to these practices can be said to display an attitude of happy integration. In addition to this coping pattern, many have recourse to mental forms of boundary drawing and a more or less pronounced emotional withdrawal from work. Few engage in an actual rejection of labour requirements and in forms of daily, personal strike. Only a minority tries to enter into conflict by trying to negotiate the terms and conditions of individual labour efforts with their supervisors.

The ambiguous character of coping clearly emerges with regard to its outcomes in terms of workplace consent, labour control and employees' action potential in the face of experienced conflicts. The establishment and maintenance of workplace consent clearly appears as an active achievement of employees' contradiction-balancing coping practices. Yet, their overall action potential, and that is their capacities to actively face encountered problems, to enforce their own rights and interests and to shape work conditions according to their own needs and interest, remains severely limited. These contradictions became evident especially for practices of appropriating meaning, as with these employees contribute to the reproduction of

labour requirements and workplace consent, but do so by giving their own sense and meaning to one's labour practices - and by reclaiming their own subjectivity. Also in concrete, practice-related terms, strategies of appropriation have such two sides. For example, developing social capital, and particularly the capacity to actively construct and manage personalised relations with superiors, is an important capacity for both adaptive daily availability demonstrations and conflictive negotiations.

In a first instance, the overall limitation of employees' action potential results from their disadvantaged power positions and the precarious effects of the individualised, informalised workplace regime of blackmailing and forced availability. Yet, this vulnerability gets reflected, reproduced, and enacted by employees' coping practices by: (a) the highly individualised character of employees' coping; (b) their various practices of un-naming, downscaling, and transferring experienced conflicts, and (c) particularly the strong reference to moral justice concepts of fair exchange, the adherence to management's logic of individual merits, and a frequent limitation of one's own claims for participation to a better integration and recognition within the given labour process and corporate culture (without questioning the latter's rules of the game). These coping practices reduce both employees' cognitive and practical conflict capacities. This is also at least partly the case for the more conflictive practices of border drawing, rejection, and negotiation.

Despite these limits, the described coping practices are effective and reasonable in the sense that they procure employees restricted, but nonetheless crucial capacities to act within the given work context. In fact, the analysis has stressed the socially grounded character of these coping practices as resulting from subjects' active confrontation with the social world and more precisely the labour process and its requirements of acting and thinking. Regarding the positioning of these coping practices within the context of current Post-Fordist restructuring of society and labour processes alike, the persistence of the mentioned concepts of fair exchange – inspired by a 'traditional' work ethic of mutual rights and duties - and their combination with the typically neoliberal intensification of individualised, merit-bound concepts of performance justice stands out. Even where this collective symbol of a fair exchange is used to legitimise claims for better work conditions, employees' first and foremost refer to individualised concepts of performance justice. Consequently, they establish distinctions (from colleagues who are too lazy or too ambitious) rather than addressing any collective identities.

The further central adaptive coping practices of un-naming, downscaling and/or transferring experienced conflicts, dissatisfactions and violations of justice expectations and psychological

contracts are powerfully effectuated by means of personalisation and naturalisation, normalisation, and externalisation. Thus, experienced problems are attributed to 'only' personal problems, specific personal situations and personal character, assumed economic necessities, or a supposedly typical 'female' character. They are rendered normal and less relevant by comparing one's own experiences to similar or worse situations elsewhere, and by transferring problems to the future or to one's private life.

In turn, the central basis for any conflictive form of coping - mental border drawing, rejection or conflictive negotiation of labour requirements - proves to be at least some awareness and open naming of interest conflicts between oneself as a worker and the firm and its management strategies. Different from (or besides) the concept of fair exchange, conflictive coping relies on a perception of the labour relation as marked by interest conflicts, power relations, and compromises that have to be achieved through struggles rather than by given, universal, morally-based mutual rights and duties. Such rights and duties, instead, are only seen as an outcome and as conditional to respective interest struggles. Such a perception of fundamental conditionality and a conflictive character of labour relations results as a central prerequisite to put into question the encountered labour requirements.

In a word, conflict capacities require conflict consciousness. This might appear as a banal outcome and conclusion. But, on the practical grounds of workplace agency and common sense, the lack of such conflict consciousness, or rather, its lacking open expression and enactment, and the consequent un-naming and repression of (hierarchical) interest conflicts severely limits employees' action potential and their possibilities to defend their own rights and interests against management's strategies of exploitation. A further important aspect of such conflict consciousness is the self-positioning as combative and competent firm actor. As demonstrated, such self-positioning (including the perception of own negotiation capacities) constitutes a relevant basis for entering into direct conflict and conflictive negotiations with superiors. In parallel, the recognition as such a combative and competent actor by management enhances chances to realise one's own demands. That is, self-perceptions and actual positions in an informal workplace hierarchy together contribute to employees' struggle capacities.

In contrast, as stated above, the second reason for overall, nonetheless limited conflict capacities is the highly disadvantaged power position in which employees find themselves in today's individualised and informalised labour relations. This particularly regards workforce fragmentation, individualised forms of coping (namely individual availability demonstrations, but also individual withdrawal and border drawing or equally individualised negotiation

strategies), and the corresponding lack of collective resources and capacities that these labour relations produce. In other words, stronger collective action potential is crucially needed also, or rather especially, in today's individualised and subjectified labour relations. Its lack, in turn, is a central reason for employees' limited action potential.

More specifically, the analysis has underlined the limited character of collective experiences in today's retail workplaces regarding daily shop floor solidarity, as well as participation in union activities and struggles (chapter nine), even in still relatively strongly unionised workplaces with existing, though weakening, collective bargaining. One central problem in this respect is a widespread lack of cognitive collective capacities, and, particularly, capacities of generalisation: the capacity and/or willingness to look beyond one's own individual experiences and to detect common collective positions, possibly shared interests and problems. This is expressed in a personalisation of shop floor relations and conflict experiences, and in individualised experiences even of collective support and struggle (as in the case of union-supported, collectively undertaken legal action). It moreover regards the delegation of responsibility for collective interest defence and work conditions to the unions, as well as the simultaneous separation between one's own (personalised, individualised) daily shop floor interactions and an external sphere of collective bargaining and interest conflict. Such personalisation, individualisation, delegation, and separation occur despite a general, equally clearly expressed subjective relevance of collective support institutions to face daily problems with the labour process and superiors.

Notwithstanding this widespread lack of cognitive collective capacities, collective attitudes, agency, and practices are highly relevant for a minority of employees. But, the effectiveness of the encountered collective agency is (again) strongly limited by the overall picture of lacking collective mobilisation and individualisation. In this, the marginalisation of collective activists by management and colleagues alike results as an additional problem.

Any strategy for enhancing employees' action potential has to take account of the dialectic of control and coping, the contradiction-balancing individual coping practices, and the lack of both individual and collective, cognitive, and practical conflict capacities uncovered here. Instead of considering precarious employees merely as unfortunate victims of increased exploitation, their common sense, including its contradictions, reproduced ideological calls, but also intrinsic interests in participation, recognition, and self-control, has to come to the fore. That is, beyond (or rather below) 'simply' aiming at re-enhancing mobilisation for 'classical' fights for better labour standards and rights, increasing employees' action potential is a complex cultural endeavour that impacts common sense.



Questioning existing common sense constructions is a precondition for enhancing conflict consciousness and collective capacities and resources. Given the predominance of practices of un-naming interest conflicts, a crucial point for both questioning common sense and enhancing (collective) conflict capacities is to render such conflicts visible: to produce and increase open, collective conflicts on the shop floor, and to overcome individualisation and personalisation, fostering instead concrete collective experiences and capacities of struggle. In other words, producing open conflict could serve as an opportunity for both, to render common sense more coherent and to acquire concrete, practical conflict capacities. Both are preconditions to change power balances at the workplace.

*Table 18: Main outcomes for each set of research questions*

<b>Management strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ interlinked character of flexibilisation and precarisation, direct and indirect control</li> <li>➤ individual and informal flexibility regulations</li> <li>➤ mechanism of forced availability and blackmailing</li> </ul>
<b>Employees' conflict experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ unlimited labour requirements and forced availability</li> <li>➤ fake promises of participation</li> <li>➤ informal flexibilisation and subjectification</li> <li>➤ classical labour intensification</li> <li>➤ effect: precarisation and subjectification as generalised though gradual processes linked to the subjective experience of a relative loss of one's own control and growing vulnerability</li> </ul>
<b>Individual coping practices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ cumulative distribution: happy integration by means of adaptation and appropriation, mental border drawing, personal strike, and conflictive negotiation</li> <li>➤ workplace consent as an active achievement of employees' practices of balancing contradictions</li> <li>➤ limited action potential due to employees' disadvantaged power positions and a lacking collective and openly conflictive perception of the labour relation due to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) highly individualised character of coping</li> <li>(b) practices of un-naming, downscaling, and transferring experienced conflicts</li> <li>(c) individualised, moral justice concepts</li> <li>(d) claims of participation limited to better integration and recognition</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Collective coping practices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ high subjective relevance of collective support institutions and daily solidarity</li> <li>➤ general lack of collective action potential due to limited collective experiences and lacking cognitive capacities of generalisation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) personalisation of shop floor relations and conflict experiences</li> <li>(b) individualised experiences of collective support and struggle,</li> <li>(c) delegation of responsibility for collective interest defence to the unions</li> <li>(d) marginalisation of collective activists by both management and colleagues</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Possible conditions for enlarging action potentials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ cultural endeavour: questioning hegemonic common sense and rendering daily lived conflicts visible</li> <li>➤ enhancing concrete collective experiences and capacities of struggle at the shop floor</li> </ul>

In a final step, the summary now turns to the employee differences and the encountered distribution of different conflict experiences and coping practices that were discovered among the employees.

As indicated above, the central distinction between the different coping patterns of adaptation and happy integration, appropriation, border drawing, personal strike, and conflictive negotiation is the degree of conflict consciousness they come along with. That is the degree of openly named conflicts and a more or less conflictive perception of the labour relation as marked by power-relations and interest differences. Regarding the distribution of both conflict experiences and conflictive coping practices across employees, some decisive differences were noted: Especially those employees with longer (precarious) employment experiences in a given firm (in the cases here at hand four to seven years) proved to be highly critical to overall work conditions, including labour requirements and exploitation as well as participation and recognition. This occurred above all in two firms with contrasting management approaches towards normative control (one with a strong normative rhetoric and the other with only limited strategies of corporate identity formation), but both with relatively strong union activities (also on the issue of precarisation). An especially high degree of consent and (relative) satisfaction was instead expressed by recent, temporary employees (with less than a year of employment experiences in their current job) and by well integrated, permanent female part-time workers - both in firms with pointed, selective management strategies of indirect control and participation targeting these groups. If any, explicit conflict experiences here concern only limited opportunities of participation and recognition.

That is, the central reason for more or less pronounced conflict experiences in these cases is an individual's specific employment history and biographic position. It is the frustration generated by continuous experiences of precarisation and the sensation of being blocked in undesirable, unsustainable, precarious employment positions, which functions as a catalyser of conflict experiences. The important point here is that experiences of conflict and precarisation depend to an important extent on the degree of maintained or lost hopes and deception about the future. In this, the level of frustration depends on the length of time that employees are already exposed to precarisation as well as to fake participation offers. Rather than a question of age alone, this is a question of the length of employment experiences in the current firm. This can be seen from the fact that there are young employees both among the most frustrated (young and less young permanent employees in firm G and I, aged between 23 and 38 years) and the most happily integrated group (recent temporary employees in firm I, in

their early twenties). Age further matters in the sense that, for both groups, the degree of frustration or hope is closely linked with individuals' biographical position.

Frustration particularly rises with a prolonged experience of being blocked not only in precarious employment positions as such, but consequently, also in one's own life-course planning. This is the case especially for employees who are in a place in their life in which they want to engage in, but already had to postpone for some time, their independent life course planning, to establish independence from their parents and have their own life. The striking fact here is that such hindrance of life course planning regards not only young employees below the age of thirty, but also interviewees in their thirties. In turn, the happily integrated temporary employees (in firm I) are those young people who still hope for a better future, who still see their current employment position as a transition period and a step into that direction, and who, at least partly, still believe in management's promises of participation, merit, and performance justice. In a similar biographic situation, they develop a different reaction, not least because they are still more in the beginning of that (supposed) transition phase, they are younger, have less employment experiences in their current firm (less than one year), and hence still have accumulated fewer years of frustration about blocked life courses.

Yet, beyond these linked factors of employment histories, age, and biographical situations, there are further aspects that are important in explaining employee differences and particularly their abilities to develop more or less conflictive coping practices. This concerns the relevance of more or less stable employment positions, the availability of collective resources, and the focus of management strategies on particular employee groups. As the examples of frustrated employees in firms I and G shows, (a) disposing over a relatively stable employment position (as permanent though still precarious part-time worker) and (b) having access to collective resources (in terms of practical union activities and cognitive resources generated by such collective experiences) prove to be important preconditions for employees to voice interest conflicts and to engage in conflictive coping practices. Together, both make a criticism of work conditions, a distancing from work, and a rejection of labour requirements easier. In terms of the young, recent employees in firm I, in contrast, their particularly uncertain employment position, and hence, a more urgent need to demonstrate availability to management's (flexibility) requests, as well as their actual exclusion from collective interest representation (achieved by management's anti-union pressures) seem to foster integration and render any possible criticism more difficult and risky.

Simultaneously, the happily integrated employees in firm I and also C (the well integrated female part-timers) are precisely those employee groups that are targeted by specific, pronounced management strategies of corporate identity formation and participation. For these groups, such selective participatory management strategies seem to be successful in fostering integration. Moreover, the context of highly individualised labour relations, which go along with these management strategies, further reduce access to collective resources and to alternative ways of acting and thinking, aside from the corporate identity. In contrast, strong frustration and conflict experiences occur in a firm with less pronounced participatory management strategies (firm G) and in case of a less targeted, marginalised group (employees with a longer employment history in that firm and/or a migration background in firm I). Firm I, in fact, is not only marked by an especially high workforce turnover. Normative control strategies are concentrated here on this 'fresh', new staff, thus, reflecting (strategically or not) the increasing difficulty (if not impossibility) to maintain fake promises of participation, performance justice, and professional growth over time and, hence, still appeal to the minority of more long term employees.

Regarding more specifically the group of relatively satisfied female part-time employees in firm C, this case points to the intersection of the so far mentioned factors, namely the selective, targeted management strategies and individuals' biographical and life-course related position, with the issue of gender relations. In contrast to the experience of part-time employment as highly precarious for a majority of employees, this group of women expresses high satisfaction with their current employment position. They substantiate this with their positive integration into the social workplace structure and its hierarchies, and particularly, with their family related care duties and interests, which exclude any full-time employment. These women live classic family arrangements with husbands as the main breadwinners and their own part-time labour as only an additional, minor contribution to the family income. As part of this arrangement, they also seem to have largely accepted a limited scope of their own aspirations in professional growth. Yet, the resulting relative satisfaction with current employment positions does not only mirror their own, personal family interests. It also reflects the lack of alternative options, given the gendered division of domestic care labour as well as the gendered structure of labour markets, the overrepresentation of women in precarious and minor part-time jobs, and the only limited employment alternatives especially for women with children. However, it is important to underline that it is not women as such who express only limited conflict experiences and develop relative satisfaction, but women in such traditional family arrangements, in specific organisational contexts, and with specific

positions in the social workplace hierarchy (as part of a particularly targeted and integrated 'in-group' among the overall workforce).

Both examples, of young temporary and female part-time employees, finally, underline the (only) selective force of management's normative strategies. As these rely on the distinction of and competition between different employee groups, they successfully foster integration of the particularly targeted 'in-groups'. But, at the same time, such selective strategies enhance withdrawal, distancing, and conflict experiences for the rest of employees who are more or less marginalised within the social workplace hierarchy.

Turning back to those employees with more pronounced conflict experiences and conflictive coping practices, a further set of factors has to be mentioned that enables the development of such coping practices and, which was relevant particularly with regard to collective coping practices. Ethical values (such as the right to self-determination, the rejection of exploitation and control) appear to be important resources for engaging in conflictive forms of individual coping and concrete collective agency and struggles alike. Though their generation (throughout the life course) has obviously not been analysed in-depth within this temporally limited and individual phase of empirical research, such ethical orientations appear as linked to employees' access to former collective experiences and to a (cognitive) collective cultural heritage, be it in or outside of the workplace. Concretely speaking, most of the employees with conflictive coping practices saw their work attitudes as linked to their family background (parents being union members or officers), friendship relations (a union officer or shop steward as a friend), or their own participation in extra-parliamentarian, leftist political collectives. In other words, socialisation and lived everyday cultures in which collective experiences, conflictive world views, attitudes and practice, as well as the mentioned ethical values, matter and are important for the development of conflictive coping practices and action potential at the workplace. There are important difference between the here relevant ethical values and the aspirations in moral justice that sustain concepts of a fair exchange. While these critical ethical values stem from collective and conflictive everyday cultures (and thus, from both specific value orientations and concrete practices), the moral justice aspirations involved in adaptive coping are directly bound up with companies' individualising performance requirements and a universalist thinking that dissimulates interest conflicts.

Summing up the issue of employee differences, capacities of conflictive coping develop from (a) a relatively stable employment condition, (b) prolonged experiences of precarisation and

blocked employment histories - especially in situations of a biographical transition in which life course planning is particularly important (here from a young to a more mature adulthood, from the first labour market entrance to a settled employment and life position), and (c) available collective resources of acting and thinking and respective everyday cultures that offer ethical value orientations (such as self-determination), conflictive worldviews, and experiences of concrete collective and conflictive practices. Integration and adaptation, in turn, flourishes in case of (a) highly precarious and vulnerable employment positions with additionally lacking access to collective support institutions (for young, recent, temporary employees experiencing their first labour market entrance), (b) lacking employment alternatives in gendered labour markets, coupled with traditional family arrangements (for female part-time employees), and (c) particular organisational contexts with strongly individualised labour relations and selective normative management strategies, among the most targeted workforce fractions. It is the specific context-bound connection and articulation of these multiple factors that is decisive. Together, they influence employees' motivations and capacities to develop more or less conflictive cognitive or practical practices.<sup>273</sup>

Given these differences, it can be assumed that struggles against precarisation might be more easily developing among 'only' relatively precarious employees than among the most vulnerable workforce. Or else, as a precondition for any active struggling, specific resources are necessary to reduce vulnerability and establish some protections from the pressures of blackmailing experienced daily. The most crucial of these resources appears to be collective capacities, not only as cognitive orientations, but anchored in concrete practices and everyday cultures. Such cultural anchoring is important, too, for the development of alternative identitarian positionings in opposition to management's normative control attempts, as well as for mutual support in the face of individualised labour relations. In order to enhance employees' action potential, there is, thus, a need for fostering concrete collective experiences, to enhance solidarity in daily shop floor relations, as well as shop floor organising to face everyday conflicts in a collective and conflictive way. This is the topic of the following section.

---

<sup>273</sup> It should be stated clearly that the reach of this analysis of employee differences necessary remains limited. For a more in-depth analysis of the various factors behind different coping practices and the interaction of these factors, a different research design would have been required. Given the limited amount of interviews, but also the particular analytical strategy, the here obtained empirical results lend themselves to any generalisation only to a very limited extent. Besides, as socially grounded subjective issues, coping practices will always have to be explained in their concrete practice-related character. In other words, the factors influencing their emergence will always appear in specific context-bound configurations. And, it is these concrete configurations (rather than abstract, general causal relations) that have explanatory value when it comes to discerning the reasons, terms, and conditions of limited and/or enlarged action potential.

*Table 19: Differences in conflict experiences and coping practices - combined influencing factors*

	<b>Factors fostering adaptation and happy integration</b>	<b>Factors fostering conflictive coping</b>
<b>Employment position</b>	highly precarious employment positions or lacking employment alternatives	relatively stable employment position
<b>Employment history</b>	recent employment and maintained hopes in future or relative satisfaction with current position	prolonged experiences of blocked professional growth and loss of hopes
<b>Targeted management strategies</b>	‘in-group’ targeted by selective normative management strategies	experiences of marginalisation and/or one’s own distancing from corporate culture
<b>Collective resources</b>	lacking access to collective support institutions	access to collective interest representation and collective everyday cultures

## ***10.2 Outlook: Possible steps for enhancing collective action potential***

Starting from these insights and findings, the central role of common sense, collective capacities, and concrete conflict experiences, this final section raises some questions and ideas regarding how precarious employees (in the retail sector and beyond) might enhance their action potential, their abilities to shape the labour process and their work conditions, to enforce their rights and interests, and for this purpose, to strengthen their collective struggle capacities.

Thinking about collective struggle capacities at workplaces, in a first instance, means thinking about labour relations and collective bargaining. It has been described in chapters four and six how unions’ and shop stewards’ power positions are currently eroding, in the Italian labour relations system in general as well as in large scale retailing. In the face of their losing power positions, the three main Italian union confederations (CGIL, CISL, UIL) seem to search for salvation in adaptation and compromising: In trying to secure their own influence by offering themselves as a reliable partner in the ongoing restructuring and attacks against labour standards; and in trying to save some peanuts for their traditional clientele, the old ‘standard’ workers. But, these attempts seem only to produce and accelerate a race to the bottom: On the one hand, it is hard to even speak of any compromising and co-management anymore - where worse collective contracts and reduced labour standards are simply enforced by the companies

and margins for any negotiations and effective collective bargaining systematically negated (such as in the case of the Fiat plant in Pomigliano<sup>274</sup>). On the other, these union strategies enforce separations and fragmentation between more or less precarious workers - while they cannot even prevent growing precarisation for the old core workforce.

Also with regard to the here analysed four case studies in Milanese large scale retailing, a deterioration of unions' power positions in collective bargaining and in-house labour relations has been described. Though in two of the case studies some important commitment of shop stewards for the issue of precarisation and precarious workers exists, this seems to be the result of an individual decision and attention of these particular shop stewards rather than any systematic overall union strategy. A situation which, among others, might be enforced by the externalisation of this topic to separate union branches within the union confederations (which are otherwise structured by sectors).<sup>275</sup> Aside from one ex-Nidil member among the interviewed employees, these specific organisations for precarious workers are not present in the here considered cases.

Given this degrading state of labour relations and the still lacking systematic inclusion of precarious workers' interests in collective bargaining processes, employees' self-organisation, solidarity and organising at the shop floor appear as all the more crucial point of intervention. However, analysis indicated serious blockages and limits of such collective action potential at the shop floor level in the here considered retail workplaces. In fact, the argument here is that enhancing collective struggle capacities against the described and daily lived pressures of precarisation requires specific effort and support. Effort to render experienced daily conflicts visible, to question once appropriated, conflict reducing and individualising coping practices and common sense; and collective support to overcome fear and vulnerability in the face of management's blackmailing powers and to increase own conflict capacities.

Besides the described limits and lacks of action potential, the empirical analysis also gives some hints as to where such a questioning of common sense and such a production of open conflict could begin: Taking as a starting point the various existing everyday conflicts and resistances, the practices of border drawing, rejection, and conflictive negotiation. As one crucial leverage point for rendering daily conflicts and contradictions within one's own common sense explicit appears the claim for one's own control. In employees' experiences, this claim for own control links the conflictive fields of flexibilisation, precarisation, and

---

<sup>274</sup> Above, in chapter 4.4, the recent case of the Fiat plant in Pomigliano was introduced as the most recent and striking example for such attitudes.

<sup>275</sup> As described in chapter four, these separate Union bodies for precarious workers are: NIDIL (Nuove Identità di Lavoro, CGIL), FELSA (Federazione Lavoratori Somministrati Autonomi Atipici, CISL) and CPO (Coordinamento per l'occupazione, UIL).



participation. Sustaining and taking this serious as one's own desires (as well as an expression of one's own service knowledge and good labour performances) necessarily brings conflicting interests to the fore of common sense. This makes it possible to disguise and attack management's participatory rhetoric as a tool of labour control, and to question respective moral justice expectations.

As demonstrated in the empirical analysis, it is necessary to give these existing claims for one's own control a (so far lacking, underdeveloped) collective form to obtain some weight in front of management's blackmailing power and the individualised labour relations. However, the investigation of practices of daily shop floor solidarity has shown that collective aspirations and practices (still) exist even in a largely individualised and personalised workplace context - as well as critical conflictive perceptions of management's strategies and labour relations. Hence, attempts to foster collective conflict capacities could start out from these existing practices. Concretely, this means that those employee groups detected as the most frustrated could serve as 'catalysers' for collective action - if they could appropriate the necessary collective resources and capacities for effectively and successfully engaging in open conflicts - instead of escaping into practices of frustrated withdrawal and/or individualised negotiation. Within this sample, this especially regards those (still or only) relatively young permanent precarious employees (especially those in their late twenties or early thirties), who already have some years of consistent employment experience in a given workplace. In a way, they constitute the most precarious employee group in this sample: Those with the highest subjectively perceived degree of precarisation, as they are durably blocked in unsatisfying, insufficient employment positions. This argument is not meant to ventilate any theory of impoverishment: Collective struggles will not happen automatically or spontaneously, only because experiences of precarisation grow. Without development of the necessary resources and capacities, this is impossible - as the lack of collective resources as a central limiting factor for retail employees' action potential has shown. But, apparently, this is the most angry group of employees, and thus, the most probable to be ready to enter into open conflict - and that is also to step back from their own established coping practices and, thus, to risk losing action potential gained so far.<sup>276</sup>

---

<sup>276</sup> Also the experience of the Punto San Precario (PSP) referred to below shows that very often workers start to become active and address the PSP after they have experienced some particular discrimination: some event that exceeds the daily experienced and somehow expected pressures of precarisation and blackmailing, and which ultimately breaks the believe in any universal corporate identity and company image. Especially discrimination and degradation with respect to others appear to be important catalysers for such a rupture of cultural imaginaries and common sense.

Regarding the development of collective resources and capacities, the activities of the network of Intelligence Precaria (IP) and particularly its strategies to enhance open conflict at precarious workplaces give some valuable inspiration (see chapter 4.5). As explained above, one of IP's central initiatives is the Punto San Precario (PSP) which offers legal support and skills for action to precarious employees. Concerning the problems of collective agency described here for retailing, three aspects of the work of the PSP appear as particularly relevant. These are: (a) the proposal to reappropriate legal action as a collective process and struggle, (b) the stress put on creating external support structures, and (c) the recognition of cultural frames and imaginaries (and thus, in other words, employees' common sense), as central terrain of conflict.

As to the first issue, in the analysed retail workplaces, union supported legal action resulted in having only limited effects on everyday collective conflict capacities and overall conflict consciousness - not least due to the individualised, consent- or integration-oriented way in which it was experienced by employees. The Punto San Precario offers an example of how such legal action can instead be reframed and developed as a collective practice. Its particular collective commitment<sup>277</sup> offers a strategy not only of conflict production and reappropriation of power resources, but also against individualisation. With regard to the central fields of conflict encountered here for large scale retailing, such collective legal action appears as a valuable, so far underexploited strategy particularly to face the problem of hyper flexible, only informally regulated work times. In most of the cases such informal deviations from the work time schedules fixed in the individual labour contract are illegal, at least as long as specific flexibility clauses and respective 'agreements' are not used (as provided by Italian labour law, see chapter 4.3). They could thus easily be sued.

Regarding the second aspect, the functioning of the PSP as an external support structure is central for both the struggle for own power resources and the enhancement of solidarity. As argued above, the establishment of such an external structure helps to enlarge collective support networks and organising, to reduce the immediate vulnerability of active employees at their workplaces, and to enhance the public visibility of conflicts beyond the concerned single workplaces. These issues are highly relevant also in a sector such as large scale retailing with its deteriorating collective labour relations, unions' reduced power positions, the pronounced anti-union pressures on the shop floor, the weak labour market positions of

---

<sup>277</sup> As described above, the idea of the PSP is to stimulate and give employees the necessary resources to enter into open conflict with their employers. Crucially, for this purpose, the PSP functions as a social space for collective aggregation also beyond single workplaces. This collective commitment is particularly visible in the attempt to stimulate collective trials, to share knowledge and skills for action, and to organise solidarity between different groups of workers as well as between workers and political activists.

(formally) low qualified retail employees, and the consequent strong marginalisation of collective activists.

In addition, such an enlarged perspective of externally supported, network-based collective agency seems particularly suitable for the frontline character of a large part of retail service labour. External supporters here have an immediate legitimation as customers who frequent these workplaces. The external support pool could be considerably enlarged by involving further customers as a target group. Especially in campaigns against corporate images, these could become crucial allies. A common interest, in this, could be the issue of service quality, which has figured so prominently in retail employees' everyday experiences of precarisation and their claims for their own labour capacities and own control.

But, making this issue of service quality a fertile ground for collective struggles against the processes of precarisation, presupposes questioning the brand- and market-framed imaginaries of a consumption society as they are also ventilated with management's rhetoric of the 'customer as king'. This does not only regard employees' aspirations in participating in a corporate culture and being recognised as self-responsible firm actors, but also the lifestyles, social relations and worldviews produced by companies' marketing strategies and sold as part of (and beyond) the original merchandises at retail shops. That is, it concerns also customers' self-definitions and common sense. On both sides, engaging in a joint struggle requires discovering the common character and uncovering the reasons of experienced problems and dissatisfactions with service quality and work condition alike, which tend to disappear behind management's strategies of corporate culture and branding. This again means disclosing and voicing these problems and dissatisfactions as social interest conflicts, and as generated by management's strategies of competition, rationalisation, and profit maximisation.<sup>278</sup>

Finally, turning to the third issue of cultural hegemony, IP's insistence in cultural imaginaries and the need to create new self-representations comes close to the here argued need for questioning the encountered dominant, conflict-balancing common sense patterns. In short, what is at stake at this level of intervention for the PSP is to enhance the experience of precarisation as a collective situation and to affirm the consciousness of own conflict capacities and struggle necessities against management's attempts of corporate identity formation. Both of these issues resulted as important also in the analysis of retail labour. The empirical analysis revealed not only the highly individualised perceptions of experienced

---

<sup>278</sup> As Brook puts it, in order not to remain stuck within the given frame of consumption and service ideologies, and to have an impact on the issues of precarisation and exploitation, any debates and struggles about service quality need to articulated at the level of social class positions (Brook 2007).

precarisation as crucially limiting employees' action potential. It also underlined the force and appeal of management's normative and participatory rhetoric among employees - even in case of pronounced everyday experiences of precarisation. Above all, analysis here pointed to the relevance of employees' own aspirations in participation, recognition, and self-regulation for their practices of balancing experienced contradictions and conflicts. Therefore, rethinking conflict, as IP calls for, has to comprise an extension of such conflict beyond material labour conditions and to include the issue of participation as an area of struggle.

The challenge in this is to rearticulate employees' participatory claims in conflictive terms. In IP's words, this requires breaking the force of the imaginary of the company as a social model for interaction and identification, and to question the hegemonic concept of marketed social relations. More concretely, with regard to the empirical data at hand, this cultural hegemony is visible especially in the concepts of moral justice and fair exchange, the personalised workplace relations and individualised practices that sustain employees' coping. Hence, as a prerequisite for producing new, alternative imaginaries and self-representations, there is a need to cast doubt upon the imperatives of competition, rationalisation, economic efficiency, corporate culture, and individualised, merit-bound performance evaluations as the only legitimate reference frame for social relations (also) at the workplace. The PSP's strategic focus on corporate images and creative forms of media and communication (such as its subvertising campaigns) could constitute a rich basis for starting such a questioning and unmasking of conflicts especially with regard to management's participatory rhetoric and corporate identity strategies – and, the other way around, to employees' own claims for participation and control.

In conclusion, with regard to these proposed different fields and strategies of intervention, it should be remembered that questioning common sense always also means questioning acquired coping practices and action potential. As demonstrated, retail employees' conflict-avoiding and contradiction-balancing coping practices produce limited but crucial capacities of acting in the face of experienced problems and encountered requirements of acting and thinking. If these coping practices, and thus, also the resulting action potential are put into doubt, then, at least momentarily, insecurity is augmented. Hence, it is necessary to not simply criticise and dismiss old patterns of thinking and acting, but to simultaneously produce new ones: new imaginaries and new practical agency options. In other words, the call for enhancing open conflicts and questioning common sense cannot remain as an abstract

cognitive exercise. It needs to become concrete: Struggling needs to become a feasible, realistic, and effective alternative agency option.

The strength in IP's analysis and action in this, first of all, is to create spaces for concrete collective experiences, relation building, and capacity development - spaces and relations that can offer effective support and action potential also beyond single, possibly also lost struggles. Second, it frames the process of precarisation as a question of hegemony. That is, as a question of interest struggles, changeable power relations, and consent production - both on a societal level and on the shop floor. With this argument of social hegemony the necessity, but also the possibility, to produce conflict and to struggle against precarisation is placed at the top of the agenda. Yet, while these strategies and arguments could respond to some of the here analysed central problems and blockages of collective conflict capacities among retail workers, the practical impact of IP's activities in this specific sector is still limited. Only one of the interviewed employees did know the Punto San Precario or the Mayday Parades, and none of the workplace struggles engaged by the PSP so far involved retailing.

However, what unions also in this sector could learn from these initiatives is above all the need for a combative attitude: First, the readiness to engage in open conflicts and to search for new, innovative strategies and forms of conflict to oppose employers' current strength. Second, to combine concrete, material labour struggles with struggles about cultural frames and common sense. And third, to support and foster processes of collective organising and capacity development on the shop floor in order to increase employees' possibilities to develop effective alternative agency options in their everyday conflicts.

For these purposes, an opening is needed within unions' cultures themselves<sup>279</sup>: An opening towards the multiple experiences of precarisation, the multiple identities of different precarious workers, and the multiple conflict issues that arise from their everyday work experiences, particularly including claims for their own control (over flexibility arrangements and labour processes) and good work (among others the opportunity to provide good service). Besides such a cultural opening, regaining a combative strategy and opposing precarisation also means to come back to the original function and strongholds of unions: (a) to struggle for the realisation of effective collective norms limiting the degree of exploitation and reducing the precariousness of wage labour; and, (b) to offer a space and instruments for workers' collective organisation in order to engage in this struggle and build up their own power positions. Finally, such struggles against precarisation cannot be limited to the micro-level of different concrete workplaces. Instead, they also require a societal scale: Employers' current

---

<sup>279</sup> See for the development of this argument also Artus 2008.

strength is expressed in and sustained not only by the new forms of work organisation and labour control put into place on the shop floor. Instead, it is reflected also in the neoliberal reregulation of the economy and society in general, and of labour market and social politics, in particular. Hence, this level of social regulation is an additional necessary field of conflict and struggles that unions would have to address if they want to fight precarisation and increase the margins for employees' to enhance their everyday action potential.

## Bibliography

- Anderson, N. and R. Schalk (1998): The Psychological Contract in Retrospect and Prospect, *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, 19, 637-647.
- Andruccioli, Paolo (2006): Grande Distribuzione. In una ricerca della Filcams la fotografia di un settore in cui convivono vecchio e nuovo, *Rassegna Sindacale*, 16.
- Armano, Emiliana (2005): *Precarietà e lavoro flessibile digitale. Brevi note a partire dal saggio 'From widgets to digits' di K. W. Stone*, Working Paper, Università di Milano.
- Armano, Emiliana (2009): *Precariousness and Innovation in Postfordism: Knowledge Workers in Turin*, GSSEPS Working Papers 5, University of Milan.
- Armano, Emiliana (2010): *Precarietà e innovazione nel postFordismo. Una ricerca qualitativa sui lavoratori della conoscenza a Torino*, Bologna: Emil di Odoya.
- Armano, Emiliana and Raffaele Sciortino (2005): No global und soziale Kämpfe. Ambivalenzen im Umbau des Sozialstaates in Italien; in: P. Birke, I. Novak and L. Stubbe, *Prekäre Bewegungen. Soziale Konflikte in Frankreich, Italien, Österreich und Dänemark*, Hamburg: GNN, 45-69.
- Artus, Ingrid (2008): Prekäre Vergesellschaftung und verrückte Kämpfe. Repressive Integration als Herrschaftsmodus im prekären Dienstleistungsbereich, *Prokla, Zeitschrift für kritische Sozialwissenschaft*, 38 (1), 27-48.
- Artus, Ingrid (2008a): *Interessenhandeln jenseits der Norm. Mittelständische Betriebe und prekäre Dienstleistungsarbeit in Deutschland und Frankreich*, L. Pries and R. Trinczek, Frankfurt/New York: campus.
- Atkinson, John (1984): Manpower Strategies for Flexible Organisations, *Personnel Management*, 28-31.
- Baethge, Martin (1991): Arbeit, Vergesellschaftung, Identität. Zur zunehmenden normativen Subjektivierung der Arbeit, *Soziale Welt*, 43 (1), 6-19.
- Ballarino, Gabriele (2000): *Il quadro generale del sistema dei servizi nell'area metropolitana milanese*, Milan: IRES Lombardia.
- Ballarino, Gabriele (2002): Contrattare l'eterogeneità: Il sindacato lombardo e la rappresentanza del lavoro atipico; in: C. e. al., *Lavoro e sindacato in Lombardia*, Milano: 229-255.
- Ballarino, Gabriele (2005): Strumenti nuovi per un lavoro vecchio. Il sindacato lombardo e la rappresentanza dei lavoratori atipici, *Sociologia del lavoro*, 97, 174-190.
- Barbieri, Paolo and Stefanie Scherer (2006): *Labour Market Flexibilisation and its Consequences in Italy*, paper, Dept. of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milano-Bicocca.
- Barbieri, Paolo and Stefanie Scherer (2007): Vite svendute. Uno sguardo analitico sulla costruzione sociale delle prossime generazioni di esclusi, *Polis*, XXI (3), 431-459.
- Barbieri, Paolo and Stefanie Scherer (2009): Labour Flexibilization and its Consequences in Italy, *European Sociological Review*, 25 (6), 677-692.
- Basic Income Network Italia: homepage, [www.bin-italia.org](http://www.bin-italia.org).
- Beck, Ulrich (1986): *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Bell, Daniel (1973): *The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society*, New York.
- Belluci, Maurizio (2008): Fatti e misfatti nei contratti a termine. La flessibilità del lavoro e le sue contraddizioni, *terza corsia online*, 12 (22), <http://www.associazionequadri.it/terzacorsiaonline22/pdf/mbelluccisettembre08.pdf>.
- Bernardi, F. (2003): Educational Performance at Entry into the Italian Labour Market, *European Sociological Review*, 19 (1).

- Bertolini, Sandra (2006): La conciliazione per le lavoratrici atipiche, *Economia & Lavoro*, 40 (1), 57-71.
- Bertolini, S. and R. Rizza (2005): Atipici?, *Sociologia del lavoro*, 97.
- Bischoff, Joachim (2001): *Mythen der "New Economy". Zur politischen Ökonomie der Wissensgesellschaft*, Hamburg: VSA.
- Bischoff, Joachim and Richard Detje (2001): Finanzgetriebenes Akkumulationsregime oder neue Ökonomie?; in: M. Candeias and F. Deppe, *Ein neuer Kapitalismus?*, Hamburg: VSA, 108-130.
- Blumer, Herbert (1954): What is wrong with social research, *American Sociological Review*, 14, 3-10.
- Boes, Andreas and Andrea Baukrowitz (2002): *Arbeitsbeziehungen in der IT-Industrie, Erosion oder Innovation der Mitbestimmung?*, Berlin: edition sigma.
- Böhle, Fritz (2010): Arbeit und Belastung; in: G. G. Voß, G. Wachtler and F. Böhle, *Handbuch Arbeitssoziologie*, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 451-481.
- Bologna, Sergio and Andrea Fumagalli (1997): *Il lavoro autonomo di seconda generazione. Scenari del postFordismo in Italia*, Mailand: Feltrinelli.
- Boltanski, Luc and Ève Chiapello (2003): *Der neue Geist des Kapitalismus*, Konstanz: UVK.
- Bolton and Boyd (2003): Trolley Dolly or skilled emotion manager? Moving on from Hochschild's Manged Heart, *Work, Employment, Society*, 17, 289-308.
- Bonefeld, Werner (1996): *Globalizaciòn y democracia: Una evaluaciòn de Estado Competitivo de Joachim Hirsch*, <http://rcci.net/globalizacion/fg049.htm>.
- Booth, A.L., M. Francesconi and J. Frank (2002): Temporary Jobs: Stepping Stones or Dead Ends?, *Economic Journal*, 112, 480.
- Borg, Erik (2001): Gramsci global?, Transnationale Hegemoniebildung aus der Perspektive der Internationalen Politischen Ökonomie, *Das Argument* 239, 43 (1), 67-78.
- Bosch, Gerhard (2001): Konturen eines neuen Normalarbeitsverhältnisses, *WSI Mitteilungen*, 4, 219-229.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1987): *Choses dites. Le sens Commun*, Paris: Les Editions de Minuit.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1987a): *Die feinen Unterschiede. Kritik der gesellschaftlichen Urteilskraft*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Bowen, Glenn A. (2006): Grounded Theory and Sensitizing Concepts, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5 (3).
- Braverman, Harry (1974): *Labor and Monopoly Capital. The degradation of work in the 20th Century.*, New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Brenner, Robert and Mark Glick (1999): Der Regulationsansatz: Theorie und Geschichte, *Marxismus*, 14, 37-130.
- Bröckling, Ulrich (2007): *Das unternehmerische Selbst. Soziologie einer Subjektivierungsform*, Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp.
- Bröckling, Ulrich, Susanne Krasmann and Thomas Lemke (2000): *Gouvernementalität der Gegenwart. Studien zur Ökonomisierung des Sozialen*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Bronstein, A.S. (1991): Temporary Work in Western Europe: Threat or Complement to Permanent Employment?, *International Labour Review*, 3.
- Brook (2007): Customer Oriented militants? A critique of the 'customer oriented bureaucracy' theory on front-line service worker collectivism, *Work Employment Society*, 21, 363-374.
- Bruni, Attila and Silvia Gherardi (2007): *Studiare le pratiche lavorative*, Bologna: Mulino.
- Burawoy, Michael (1979): *Manufacturing Consent. Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Burchardt, Hans-Jürgen (1996): Die Globalisierungsthese, *Das Argument* 217, 38 (5/6), 741-756.



- Büro für angenehme Lebensweise (2004): Auf der Suche nach einer gemeinsamen Sprache: Soziale Konflikte in Frankreich, Italien, Österreich, Dänemark... und in der Bundesrepublik; in: P. Birke, I. Novak and L. Stubbe, *Prekäre Bewegungen. Soziale Konflikte in Frankreich, Italien, Österreich und Dänemark*, Hamburg: GNN, 3-23.
- Candeias, Mario (2000): B2B or not to be. Transnationale Unternehmensstrukturierung im Zeitalter des Intra- und Internets, *Das Argument* 238, 42 (5/6), 708-719.
- Candeias, Mario (2001): Arbeit, Hochtechnologie und Hegemonie im Neoliberalismus; in: M. Candeias and F. Deppe, *Ein neuer Kapitalismus?*, Hamburg: VSA, 150-179.
- Candeias, Mario (2004): *Neoliberalismus Hochtechnologie Hegemonie*, Hamburg: Argument.
- Castel, Robert (1995): *Les Métamorphoses de la question sociale. Une chronique du salariat*, Paris: Editions Fayard.
- Castel, Robert (2005): *Die Stärkung des Sozialen. Leben im neuen Wohlfahrtsstaat*, Hamburg: Hamburger Edition.
- Castel, Robert and Klaus Dörre (2009): *Prekarität, Abstieg, Ausgrenzung. Die soziale Frage am Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts.*, Frankfurt/Main: campus.
- Castells, Manuel (1998): *The information age: economy, society and culture. Volume 1: The rise of the network society*, Oxford/Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Cella, Gian Primo (2001): La rappresentanza dei lavoratori atipici: un ritorno al passato?; in: G. P. Cella and G. Provasi, *Lavoro, sindacato, partecipazione. Scritti in onore di Guido Baglioni*, Milan: Franco Angeli.
- Censis and Iref (2003): *Ci penserò domain. Comportamenti, opinioni e attese per il futuro dei CoCoCo*, Roma.
- CGIL (2002): *documentation on protest against reform of dismissal legislation*, <http://www.lomb.cgil.it/art18/cronistoria.htm>
- <http://www.lomb.cgil.it/art18/art18.php#lotte>.
- chainworkers: [www.chainworkers.org](http://www.chainworkers.org).
- chainworkers (2006): *Vittoria del Punto San Precario con le SEA girls*, [www.chainworkers.org/node/91](http://www.chainworkers.org/node/91).
- chainworkers (2006a): *Vittoria delle precarie della Sea. Articolo sul Manifesto*, [www.chainworkers.org/node/91](http://www.chainworkers.org/node/91).
- chainworkers (2006b): *Reader*, [www.chainworkers.org/materiali/chainworkers\\_reader.pdf](http://www.chainworkers.org/materiali/chainworkers_reader.pdf).
- Cirioli, Daniele (2010): *Il "partito" dei pensionati. Sindacati, freno modernizzatore che peggiora la condizione dei giovani*, <http://www.loccidentale.it/articolo/sindacati,+freno+modernizzatore+che+peggiora+la+condizione+dei+giovani.0086398>, 17.02.2010.
- Coletto, Diego and Roberto Pedersini (2009): La flessibilità numerica nei settori privato e pubblico fra strategia e contingenza, *Giornale di diritto del lavoro e di relazione industriali*, 124.
- Collinson, David (1994): Strategies of resistance. Power, knowledge and subjectivity in the workplace.; in: Jermier, Knights and Nord, *Resistance and power in organizations*, London/New York: Routledge, 25-68.
- Confcommercio, Filcams, Fisascat and Uiltucs (2004): *Contratto Collettivo Nazionale di Lavoro. Commercio*, [http://www.cgil.it/CCNL/Commercio \(FILCAMS\)/Terziario Distribuzione/Terziario Distribuzione Servizi Confcommercio/indice.pdf](http://www.cgil.it/CCNL/Commercio%20(FILCAMS)/Terziario%20Distribuzione/Terziario%20Distribuzione%20Servizi%20Confcommercio/indice.pdf).
- Contini, B., L. Pacelli and C. Villosio (1999): *Short Employment Spells in Italy, Germany and Great Britain: Testing the Port of Entry Hypothesis*, CEPR Discussion Paper No. 426, Centre for Economic Performance, Labour Market Programme.
- Corsetti, Gianni and Emiliano Mandrone (2010): Il lavoro: tra forma e sostanza. Una lettura dell'occupazione non standard in Italia, *Economia e Lavoro*, XLIV, 71-97.
- Coyle, Diane (1997): *Weightless world: Strategies for Managing the Digital Economy*, Oxford.

- Cremaschi, Giorgio (2010): La vittoria di Bonanni al congresso Cgil, *infoaut*, 13.05.2010, <http://www.infoaut.org/articolo/la-vittoria-di-bonanni-al-congresso-cgil>.
- Cunningham, Patrick (2000): Für eine Untersuchung der Autonomia. Interview mit Sergio Bologna, *Left History*, 7 (2), [www.copyriot.com/unefarce/no5/autonomia.html](http://www.copyriot.com/unefarce/no5/autonomia.html).
- Curcio, Renato (2002): *L'azienda totale. Dispositivi totalizzanti e risorse di sopravvivenza nelle grandi aziende della distribuzione*, Dogliani: Sensibili alle folie.
- Delapina, Franz (1997): Die Erschließung der Peripherie. Zur Geschichte informeller Arbeitsverhältnisse in der außereuropäischen Welt; in: A. Komlosy and e. al, *Ungeregt und unterbezahlt, Der informelle Sektor in der Weltwirtschaft*, Frankfurt/Main: Brandes & Apsel, 29-44.
- dell'Aringa, Carlo and Manuela Samek Lodovici (1997): Policies for the Unemployed and Social Shock Absorbers: The Italian Experience; in: M. Rhodes, *Southern European Welfare States. Between Crisis and Reform*, Oxford/New York: Routledge, 172-197.
- Demontage, Gruppe (1998): *PostFordistische Guerilla. Vom Mythos nationaler Befreiung*, Münster: Unrast Verlag.
- Deniz, Alev and Anne Schüttelpelz (2001): Beschäftigungsentwicklungen im europäischen Einzelhandel; in: H. Rudolph, *Aldi oder Arkaden?*, Berlin: Hans Böckler Stiftung, Edition Sigma, 103-129.
- Deppe, Frank (1997): *Fin de Siècle. Am Übergang ins 21. Jahrhundert*, Köln: Papy Rossa.
- Deutschmann, Christoph (2002): *Postindustrielle Industriesoziologie. Theoretische Grundlagen, Arbeitsverhältnisse und soziale Identitäten*, Weinheim/München: Juventa.
- Döhl, Volker, Nick Kratzer and Dieter Sauer (2000): Krise der NormalArbeit(s)Politik. Entgrenzung von Arbeit - Neue Anforderungen an Arbeitspolitik, *WSI-Mitteilungen*, 53 (1), 5-17.
- Dombois, R. (1999): *Auf dem Weg zu einem neuen Normalarbeitsverhältnis? Die Erosion des Normalarbeitsverhältnisses und neue Strategien der Erwerbsarbeit*, Arbeitspapier 36, Zentrale wissenschaftliche Einrichtung Arbeit und Region, Universität Bremen.
- Dörre, Klaus (2009): Prekarität im Finanzmarkt-Kapitalismus; in: R. Castel and K. Dörre, *Prekarität, Abstieg, Ausgrenzung. Die soziale Frage am Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt/Main: campus, 35-64.
- Dörre, Klaus (2009a): Bringing Capitalism back in! Landnahme als Konzept der Arbeitssoziologie, *Widerspruch*, 57, 79-92.
- Dörre, Klaus and Tatjana Fuchs (2006): Prekarität und soziale(Des-)Integration, *trend onlinezeitung*, 04.
- Dörre, Klaus, Klaus Krämer and Frederic Speidel (2004): Prekäre Arbeit. Ursachen, soziale Auswirkungen und subjektive Verarbeitungsformen unsicherer Beschäftigungsverhältnisse, *Das Argument* 256, 46 (3/4), 378-397.
- Drucker, Peter (1969): *The Age of Discontinuity; Guidelines to Our changing Society.*, New York: Harper and Row.
- du Gay, Paul (1996): *Consumption and Identity at work*, London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Dubet, Francois, Valérie Caillet, Régis Cortéséro, David Mélo and Françoise Rault (2006): *Injustices. l'expérience des inégalités au travail*, Paris: Seuil.
- Edwards, Richard (1981): *Herrschaft im modernen Produktionsprozess*, Frankfurt/Main: Campus.
- Esping-Andersen, Gösta and Marino Regini (2000): *Why deregulating labour markets*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- euromayday: [www.euromayday.org](http://www.euromayday.org).
- European Commission (1997): *The Single Market Review: Subseries II: Impact on Services*, Luxemburg.
- European Commission (2000): *Panorama Europäischer Unternehmen 1999*, Luxemburg.

- European Foundation (2005): *EWCS: European Working Conditions Survey 2005*, <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ewco/surveys/ewcs2005>.
- Eurostat: *Labour Force Survey*, Online database, [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/employment\\_unemployment\\_ifs/data/database](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/employment_unemployment_ifs/data/database).
- Eurostat (2003): *Europäische Sozialstatistik. Erhebung über Arbeitskräfte. Ergebnisse 2002*, [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY\\_OFFPUB/KS-BP-02-007/DE/KS-BP-02-007-DE.PDF](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-BP-02-007/DE/KS-BP-02-007-DE.PDF).
- Eurostat (2005): *Labour Force Survey. Principal results 2005*, [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/product\\_details/publication?p\\_product\\_code=KS-NK-06-013](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/product_details/publication?p_product_code=KS-NK-06-013).
- Eurostat (2008): *Main features of the EU-27 service sector*, [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/product\\_details/publication?p\\_product\\_code=KS-SF-08-078](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/product_details/publication?p_product_code=KS-SF-08-078).
- Eurostat (2010): *European Union Labour Force Survey. Annual results 2009*, [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY\\_OFFPUB/KS-QA-10-035/EN/KS-QA-10-035-EN.PDF](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-QA-10-035/EN/KS-QA-10-035-EN.PDF).
- Ezzy (2001): A simulacrum of workplace community: Individualism and engineered culture, *Sociology*, 35, 631-650.
- Fargion (1997): Social Assistance and the North-South Cleavage in Italy; in: M. Rhodes, *Southern European Welfare States. Between Crisis and Reform*, Oxford/New York: Routledge, 135-154.
- Felletti, Duilio (2007): Alcune considerazioni ed elementi di riflessione per andare al referendum sindacale con maggiore consapevolezza, e per comprendere meglio il dibattito politico in corso, *Reds*, October, <http://www.ecn.org/reds/lavoro/lavoro0710welfare2003.html>.
- Fellini, I. (2001): *Aggiornamento in bozza - marzo 2004*; ed. by: M. Samek and R. Semenza, *Le forme del lavoro*, Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Ferrari, Luigi (2004): Aspettative, disagio e soddisfazione, *Lavori. Quaderni di rassegna sindacale: I lavoratori temporanei*, 2, 225-236.
- Ferrera, Maurizio (1996): The Southern Model of Welfare in Social Europe, *Journal of European Social Policy*, 6 (1), 17-37.
- Ferreras, Isabelle (2003/2004): *Le travail démocratique. Du caractère expressif, public et politique de l'expérience du travail dans les services. Le cas des caissières de supermarché syndiquées en Belgique*, Dissertation doctorale, Université catholique de Louvain.
- Ferreras, Isabelle (2007): *Critique politique du travail. Travailler dans l'heure de la société des services*, Paris: Presse de Sciences Po.
- Ferreras, Isabelle (2008): De la dimension collective de la liberté individuelle. Capacité du collectif et ressources distribuées. L'exemple des salariés, *Raisons pratiques*, 18, Special Issue: L'enquête sur les capacités.
- Foucault, Michel (1977): *Überwachen und Strafen. Die Geburt des Gefängnisses*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Foucault, Michel (1989): *Der Gebrauch der Lüste. Sexualität und Wahrheit 2*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Foucault, Michel (1989a): *Die Sorge um sich. Sexualität und Wahrheit 3*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Foucault, Michel (2006): Perché studiare il potere. La questione del soggetto; in: P. Dalla Vigna, *Poteri e strategie. L'assoggettamento dei corpi e l'elemento sfuggente*, Milano: Associazione Culturale Mimesis, 103-114.
- Foucault, Michel (2009): *Die Regierung des Selbst und der anderen*, Frankfurt/Main:

- Suhrkamp.
- Fourastié, Jean (1954): *Die große Hoffnung des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts*, Köln: Bund.
- Frey, Luigi and A. Montanino (1995): Trasformazioni produttive e lavoro nei servizi con particolare riguardo al commercio, *Quaderni rossi di economia del lavoro*, 53.
- Frey, Luigi and G. Pappadà (2003): Flessibilità del lavoro in Italia e Legge Biaggi, *Quaderni di economia del lavoro*, 78, 7-60.
- Frey, Luigi and G. Pappadà (2003): *Bad Jobs and atypical work in Italy*, [www.dise.unisa.it/AIEL/frey\\_pappada.pdf](http://www.dise.unisa.it/AIEL/frey_pappada.pdf).
- Frey, Luigi et al. (2002): L'occupazione precaria e il ruolo delle politiche del lavoro e della contrattazione collettiva in Italia, *Quaderni del economia del lavoro*, 73, 49-94.
- Fullin, Giovanna (2004): *Vivere l'instabilità del lavoro*, Mulino, Bologna: Mulino.
- Fullin, Giovanna (2004a): *I contratti di lavoro atipici - Note sulle modificazioni legislative introdotte dalle legge di riforma del mercato del lavoro del 2003*, <http://www.sociologia.unimib.it/old/wcms/file/materiali/3483.pdf>.
- Fumgalli, Andrea and Sandro Mezzadra (2009): *Crisi dell'economia globale. Mercati finanziari, lotte sociali e nuovi scenari politici*, Verona: Ombre Corte.
- Gagliarducci, S. (2004): *What is Really Bad in Temporary Employment?*, European University Institute.
- Gallino, L. (2004): *La globalizzazione della precarietà*, Atti di Convegno, I. Masulli, Precarietà del lavoro e società precaria nell'Europa contemporanea, Roma.
- Garfinkel, Harold (1962): Common sense knowledge of social structures: The documentary method of interpretation in lay and professional fact finding; in: J. M. Scher, *Theories of the mind*, New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 689-712.
- Garfinkel, Harold (1967): *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Gleißmann, Wilfried and Klaus Peters (2001): *Mehr Druck durch mehr Freiheit, Die neue Autonomie in der Arbeit und ihre paradoxen Folgen*, Hamburg: VSA.
- Gottschall, Karin and G. Günter Voß (2005): *Entgrenzung von Arbeit und Leben. Zum Wandel der Beziehung von Erwerbstätigkeit und Privatsphäre im Alltag*, 2nd edition, München/Mering: Hampp.
- Gramsci, Antonio (1992): *Gefängnishefte. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, D. G. Projekt, K. Bochmann and W. F. Haug, Vol. 4, Hamburg: Argument.
- Gramsci, Antonio (1994): *Gefängnishefte. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, D. G. Projekt, K. Bochmann and W. F. Haug, Vol. 6, Hamburg: Argument.
- Gramsci, Antonio (1995): *Philosophie der Praxis. Gefängnishefte 10 und 11*; ed. by: W. F. Haug, Hamburg: Argument.
- Hall, Laura and Carol Atkinson (2006): Improving Working Lives: Flexible Working and the Role of Employee Control, *Employee Relations*, 28 (4), 374-386.
- Hall, Stuart (1990): *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*; ed. by: J. Rutherford, Identity: Community, Culture, Difference, London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Hall, Stuart (1996a): The Formation of a Diasporic Intellectual; in: D. Morely and K.-H. Chen, *Stuart Hall, Critical dialogues in cultural studies*, London: Routledge.
- Hall, Stuart (1997): Introduction: Who needs 'Identity'?; in: S. Hall and P. du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage, 1-17.
- Hall, Stuart (2000): Massenkultur und Staat; in: *Ausgewählte Schriften 2*, Hamburg: Argument, 92-125.
- Hall, Stuart, David Held, Don Hubert and Kenneth Thompson (1996): *An introduction to Modern Societies*, Oxford/Malden/Carlton: Blackwell.
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri (2001): *Empire*, Cambridge/Massachusetts/London: Harvard University Press.
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri (2004): *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, New York: Penguin.

- Harvey, David (1997): *La crisi della modernità*, Milan: EST.
- Hauer, Dirk (2004): Voll normal. Zur Diskussion um Niedriglohnsektoren in Deutschland, *Analyse und Kritik*, 490, 8-9.
- Hauer, Dirk (2005a): Strategische Verunsicherung. Zu den identitären Fallstricken der Debatte um prekäre Arbeit, *Analyse und Kritik*, 494, 4-5.
- Hauer, Dirk (2005b): Avantgarde und Nabelschau. Der Weg zu einer Bewegung der Prekären ist für die Linke steinig, *Analyse und Kritik*, 498, 14-15.
- Hauer, Dirk (2007): Umkämpfte Normalität. Prekarisierung und die Neudefinition proletarischer Reproduktionsbedingungen; in: R. Klautke and B. Oehrlein, *Prekarität - Neoliberalismus - Deregulierung*, Hamburg: VSA, 30-42.
- Haug, Frigga (1996): Das neoliberale Projekt, der männliche Arbeitsbegriff und die fällige Erneuerung des Geschlechtervertrags, *Das Argument* 217, 38 (5/6).
- Haug, Wolfgang Fritz (2000): Prolegomena zu einer Kritik der Neuen Ökonomie, *Das Argument* 238, 42 (5/6), 619-646.
- Haug, Wolfgang Fritz (2001): Die Produktionsweise denken; in: Bieling, Dörre, Steinhilber and Urban, *Flexibler Kapitalismus. Analyse, Kritik und politische Praxis*, Hamburg: VSA, 36-53.
- Haug, Wolfgang Fritz (2003): *Hightech Kapitalismus, Analysen zu Produktionsweise, Arbeit, Sexualität, Krieg und Hegemonie*, Hamburg: Argument.
- Häusler, Jürgen and Joachim Hirsch (1987): Regulation und Parteien im Übergang zum "Post-Fordismus", *Das Argument* 165, 651-655.
- Hirsch, Joachim (1990): *Kapitalismus ohne Alternative? Materialistische Gesellschaftstheorie und Möglichkeiten einer sozialistischen Politik heute*, Hamburg: VSA.
- Hirsch, Joachim (1995): *Der nationale Wettbewerbsstaat. Staat, Demokratie und Politik im globalen Kapitalismus*, Berlin.
- Hirsch, Joachim (1996): Weltkapitalismus oder Nationalstaat - eine falsch gestellte Frage, *Das Argument* 217, 38 (5/6).
- Hirsch, Joachim (2001): Der Staates neue Kleider. NGOs im Prozess der Internationalisierung des Staates; in: U. e. a. Brand, *Nichtregierungsorganisationen in der Transformation des Staates*, Münster: Dampfboot, 13-42.
- Hirsland, Andreas and Werner Schneider (2001): Wahrheit, Ideologie und Diskurse, Zum Verhältnis von Diskursanalyse und Ideologiekritik; in: R. Keller, A. Hirsland, W. Schneider and W. Viehöver, *Handbuch für Sozialwissenschaftliche Diskursanalyse, Band 1: Theorien und Methoden*, Opladen: Vs Verlag, 373-402.
- Hochschild, Arlie (1983): *The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of Human Feeling*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Holtrup, André (2007): *Die subjektive Relevanz von Arbeitsregulierung. Zwischen Selbstrepräsentation und kollektiver Interessensorientierung*, Doctoral Thesis, Universität Bremen.
- Holzkamp, Klaus (1985): *Grundlegung der Psychologie*, Frankfurt/Main, New York: Campus.
- Holzkamp, Klaus (1991): Was heißt "Psychologie vom Subjektstandpunkt"? *Forum kritische Psychologie*, 28, 5-19.
- Huws, Ursula (2000): Der Mythos der weightless economy, *Das Argument* 238, 42 (5/6), 646-660.
- Hyman, Richard (1975): *Industrial Relations. A marxist introduction*, London/Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ichino, A., F. Mealli and T. Nannicini (2003): *Il lavoro interinale in Italia. Trappola del precariato o trampolino verso un impiego stabile?*, rapporto di ricerca, European University Institute.
- infoaut (2010): *Da 2 a 5 anni in più di lavoro così il governo allunga l'attesa*, 2010-06-08, <http://www.infoaut.org/articolo/da-2-a-5-anni-in-piu-di-lavoro-cosi-il-governo>

- allunga-lattesa/.
- infoaut (2010a): *Pomigliano d'Arco: le condizioni della Fiat*, 2010-06-09; <http://www.infoaut.org/articolo/pomigliano-darco-le-condizioni-della-fiat>.
- infoaut (2010b): *"Sacrificarsi un pò, lavorare di più..."* 2010-06-11, <http://www.infoaut.org/articoli/cat/precariato-sociale/os/2/>.
- infoaut (2010c): *Pomigliano: l'accordo Fiat vince ma non convince*, 2010-06-23; <http://www.infoaut.org/articolo/pomigliano-laccordo-fiat-vince-ma-non-convince/>.
- infoaut (2010d): *Verso l'accordo separato per Mirafiori*, 2010-12-23, <http://www.infoaut.org/articolo/verso-laccordo-separato-per-mirafiori>.
- infoaut (2010e): *Marchione babbo natale velenoso. La FIOM tiene botta e guarda ai movimenti*, 2010-12-24, <http://www.infoaut.org/articolo/marchionne-babbo-natale-velenoso-la-fiom-tiene-botta-e-guarda-ai-movimenti>.
- Intelligence Precaria: [www.prepcaria.org](http://www.prepcaria.org).
- ISTAT (2001): *Economic Census. Industria e Servizi*, <http://dwcis.istat.it/cis/index.htm>.
- ISTAT (2010): *Labour Force Survey. Employment statistics*, [http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCCV\\_OCCUPAT](http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCCV_OCCUPAT).
- Jacobsen, Heike (2001): Produktionskonzepte im europäischen Einzelhandel: Deutschland, Italien, Schweden; in: *Aldi oder Arkaden? Unternehmen und Arbeit im Europäischen Einzelhandel*, Berlin: sigma, 23-56.
- Jacobsen, Heike (2002): *Retail Sector*, Project Servemploi. Final Thematical Report, sfs Dortmund.
- Jäger, Siegfried and Magarete Jäger (1999): *Kritische Diskursanalyse*, Duisburg: DISS.
- Jameson, Fredric (1991): *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Jenson, J., E. Hagen and C. Reddy (1988): *Feminization of the labor force: Paradoxes and promises*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jessop, Bob (2001): Die Globalisierung des Kapitals und die Zukunft des Nationalstaates. Ein Beitrag zur Kritik der globalen politischen Ökonomie; in: J. Hirsch, B. Jessop and N. Poulantzas, *Die Zukunft des Nationalstaates*, Hamburg: VSA, 139-170.
- Jessop, Bob (2002): Informationskapitalismus und Empire: Das postmarxistische Loblied auf die US-Hegemonie in einer neuen Weltordnung, *Das Argument* 248, 44 (5/6), 777-790.
- Katz, Jack (2002): Start here: Social ontology and research strategy, *Theoretical Criminology*, 6 (3), 255-278.
- Katz, Jack (2009): *The Ethnographer's crucible*, conference paper, "Terzo Workshop Etnografia e Ricerca Sociale", University of Bergamo, 2009-07-25,27.
- Kirsch, Klein, Lehndorff and Voss Dahm (1999): *"Darf's etwas weniger sein?" Arbeitszeiten und Beschäftigungsbedingungen im Lebensmitteleinzelhandel. Ein europäischer Vergleich*, Berlin: sigma.
- Kleemann, Frank, Ingo Matuschek and G. Günter Voß (2002): Subjektivierung von Arbeit. Ein Überblick zum Stand der soziologischen Diskussion; in: M. Moldaschl and G. G. Voß, *Subjektivierung von Arbeit.*, München/Mering: Hampp, 53-100.
- Knights, David and Hugh Willmott (1989): Power and subjectivity at work: From degradation to subjugation in social relations, *Sociology*, 23 (4), 975–995.
- Knights, David and Hugh Willmott (1990): *Labor process theory*, London: Macmillan.
- Korczynski, Marek (2003): Communities of Coping: Collective Emotional Labour in Service Work, *Organization*, 10 (1), 55-79.
- Kratzer, Nick (2003): *Arbeitskraft in Entgrenzung. Grenzenlose Anforderungen, erweiterte Spielräume, begrenzte Ressourcen*, Berlin: edition sigma.
- Krauss, Hartmut (1994a): *Subjektive Widerspruchsverarbeitung und die Möglichkeit "praktisch-kritischer" Bewußtseinsentwicklung. Zur Formierung widerständiger Subjektivität in kritisch-marxistischer Perspektive*, Teil 1,

- <http://www.glasnost.de/autoren/krauss/wid1.html>.
- Krauss, Hartmut (1994b): *Subjektive Widerspruchsverarbeitung und die Möglichkeit "praktisch-kritischer" Bewußtseinsentwicklung. Zur Formierung widerständiger Subjektivität in kritisch-marxistischer Perspektive*, Teil 2, <http://www.glasnost.de/autoren/krauss/wid2.html>.
- Krauss, Hartmut (1994c): *Subjektive Widerspruchsverarbeitung und die Möglichkeit "praktisch-kritischer" Bewußtseinsentwicklung. Zur Formierung widerständiger Subjektivität in kritisch-marxistischer Perspektive*, Teil 3, <http://www.glasnost.de/autoren/krauss/wid3.html>.
- Krauss, Hartmut (1996): *Wiederkehr der Proletarität oder Neustrukturierung sozialer Ungleichheit? Sozialstruktur und Subjektformierung im "postFordistischen" Kapitalismus*, [www.glasnost.de](http://www.glasnost.de).
- Krauss, Hartmut (1996a): *Das umkämpfte Subjekt. Widerspruchsverarbeitung im "modernen" Kapitalismus*, H. Behrend, Berlin: trafo verlag.
- Krauss, Hartmut (1997): Gramscis Beitrag zur Grundlegung einer subjektwissenschaftlichen Perspektive des Marxismus; in: U. Hirschfeld, *Gramsci-Perspektiven*, Hamburg: Argument, 37-52.
- Krauss, Hartmut (2004): *Zwischen Subjektivismus und Objektivismus. Zum Erkenntnisgehalt der theoretischen Konzeption Pierre Bourdieus*, <http://www.glasnost.de/autoren/krauss/bourd.html>.
- Kunda, Gideon (1995): Engineering culture: control and commitment in a high-tech corporation, *Organization Science*, 6 (2).
- Laroche, Josepha (1998): *Politique internationale*, Paris: LGDJ.
- Lazzarato, Maurizio (1997): *Lavoro Immateriale. Forme di vita e produzione di soggettività*, Verona: Ombre Corte.
- Lehndorff, Steffen (2001): Der europäische Einzelhandel und die Regulierung von Arbeitsmärkten; in: H. Rudolph, *Aldi oder Arkaden? Unternehmen und Arbeit im Europäischen Einzelhandel*, Berlin: sigma, 131-156.
- Lenzi, L. (2001): *Lavoratori atipici e sindacato: una difficile rappresentanza*, Università degli studi di Firenze.
- Lipietz, Alain (1992): Vom Althusserismus zur "Theorie der Regulation"; in: D. e. al., *Hegemonie und Staat. Kapitalistische Regulation als Projekt und Prozess*, Münster: Dampfboot, 9-54.
- Lloyd, Caroline and Jonathan Payne (2008): *What is a skilled job? Exploring perceptions of skill in two UK call centres*, conference paper, "26th International Labour Process Conference", University College, Dublin, 2008-03-18,20.
- Lo, Wattle C. W. (2000): *Corporate culture as normative control: A study of Hong Kong employees in a team-based organisation*, Honours thesis, University of Otago.
- Lodovici, Manuela Samek and Roberta Semenza (2004): *Il lavoro part-time. Anomalie del caso italiano nel quadro europeo*, Milan: Franco Angeli.
- Luxemburg, Rosa (1975): Die Akkumulation des Kapitals. Ein Beitrag zur ökonomischen Erklärung des Imperialismus; in: *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 5, Berlin: Dietz, 5-411.
- Marazzi, Christian (1994): *Il posto dei calzini. La svolta linguistica dell'economia e i suoi effetti nella politica*, Bellinzona: Casagrande.
- Marshall, H. (1994): Discourse analysis in an occupational context; in: C. Cassell and G. Symon, *Qualitative Methods in Organisational Research*, London: Sage.
- Marx, Karl (1996): Capital Vol. 1; in: *MECW 35*, London/New York: Lawrence and Wishart/International Publishers, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/cw/volume35/index.htm>.
- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels (1972): 18ter Brumaire des Luis Bonaparte; in: *MEW 8, Werke*, Berlin: Dietz Verlag.

- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels (1975): German Ideology; in: *MECW 5*, London/New York: Lawrence and Wishart/International Publishers, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/cw/volume05/index.htm>.
- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels (1976): Manifesto of the Communist Party; in: *MECW 6*, London/New York: Lawrence and Wishart/International Publishers, 477-519, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/cw/volume06/index.htm>.
- Matuschek, Ingo, Frank Kleemann and G. Günter Voß (2008): Subjektivierte Taylorisierung als Beherrschung der Arbeitsperson, *Prokla 150*, 38, 49-64.
- Mayer, Leo and Fred Schmid (1999): *Welt-Sheriff NATO. Weltwirtschaftsordnung und neue NATO-Doktrin*, ISW-Report 40.
- Mayer-Ahuja, Nicole (2003): *Wieder dienen lernen? Vom westdeutschen "Normalarbeitsverhältnis" zu prekärer Beschäftigung seit 1973*, Berlin: edition sigma.
- Menz, Wolfgang (2009): *Die Legitimität des Marktregimes. Leistungs- und Gerechtigkeitsorientierungen in neuen Formen betrieblicher Leistungs politik*, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag.
- Minssen, Heiner (2000): *Begrenzte Entgrenzung. Wandlungen von Organisation und Arbeit*, Berlin: edition sigma.
- Moldaschl, Manfred and Dieter Sauer (2000): Internalisierung des Marktes - Zur neuen Dialektik von Kooperation und Herrschaft; in: H. Minssen, *Begrenzte Entgrenzung, Wandel von Organisation und Arbeit*, Berlin: edition sigma, 205-224.
- Moldaschl, Manfred and Günter Voß (2002): *Subjektivierung von Arbeit*, München/Mering: Hampp.
- Möller, Carola (2000): Immaterielle Arbeit - die neue Dominante in der Wertschöpfungskette, *Das Argument 235*, 42 (2).
- Montag, Gruppe Blauer (2002): Arbeitskraftunternehmer, Ich-AG und "aktivierender Sozialstaat". Die neuen Hierarchien des Arbeitsmarktes, *Das Argument 248*, 44 (5/6), 709-723.
- Montag, Gruppe Blauer (2008): *Risse im Putz. Autonomie, Prekarisierung und autoritärer Sozialstaat*, Berlin/Hamburg: Assoziation A.
- Morini, Cristina (2007): The Feminization of Labour in Cognitive Capitalism, *Feminist Review*, 87, 40-59.
- Morini, Cristina (2010): La nuova dimensione smisurata e qualitativa del lavoro; in: C. Morini, *Per amore o per forza. Femminilizzazione del lavoro e biopolitiche del corpo*, Verona: ombre corte.
- Mückenberger, Ulrich (1985): Die Krise des Normalarbeitsverhältnisses, Teil 1, *Zeitschrift für Sozialreform*, 31 (7), 415-434.
- Murgia, Analisa (2010): *Dalla precarietà lavorativa alla precarietà sociale. Biografie in transito tra lavoro e non lavoro*, Bologna: I libri di Emil.
- Negrelli, Serafino (2005): *Sociologia del lavoro*, Roma/Bari: Laterza.
- Niepcz, W. and E. Molleman (1998): Work design issues in lean production from a sociotechnical systems perspective: Neo-Taylorism or the next step in sociotechnical design?, *Human Relations*, 51 (3), 259-281.
- O'Doherty, D. and H. Willmott (2001): Debating Labour Process Theory. The issue of Subjectivity and the Relevance of Poststructuralism, *Sociology*, 35 (2), 457-476.
- PAQ (1980): *Automationsarbeit: Empirie 1*, AS 43, Berlin: Argument.
- PAQ (1987): *Widersprüche der Automationsarbeit*, Berlin: Argument.
- Parnreiter, Christof (1997): Die Renaissance der Ungesicherheit: Über die Ausweitung informeller Beziehungen zwischen Kapital und Arbeit im Zeitalter der Globalisierung; in: A. Komlosy and e. al., *Ungeregelt und unterbezahlt, Der informelle Sektor in der Weltwirtschaft*, Frankfurt/Main: Brandes & Apsel, 203-220.
- Paugam, Serge (2000): *Le salarié de la précarité*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.



- Paugam, Serge (2008): *Die elementaren Formen der Armut*, Hamburg: Hamburger Edition.
- Pellegrini, Luca (2000): Regulations and Retail Trade; in: G. Galli and J. Pelkmans, *Regulatory Reform and Competitiveness in Europe II*, Cheltenham/Northampton: Edward Elgar.
- Pellegrini, Luca (2005): *Sviluppo del lavoro nel commercio*, conference paper, "Il lavoro nel commercio moderno. Caratteristiche e prospettive delle attuali formule distributive", Milano, CGIL-FILCAMS Lombardia, 2005-06-27,28.
- Pellegrini, Luca and Bruna Boroni (2004): *L'organizzazione del lavoro nelle imprese della grande distribuzione*, Roma: Ente Bilaterale Nazionale Terziario.
- Pentimalli, Barbara (2009): *Un'etnografia scopre le quinte di un call centre: collaborazione rumorosa, resistenza e derisione clandestina dell'utente*, conference paper, "Terzo Workshop Etnografia e Ricerca Sociale", University of Bergamo, 2009-06-25,27.
- Peter, Lothar (1984): Arbeit, Betrieb, Bewußtsein, Zur Bewußtseinsentwicklung der Arbeiterklasse in der neueren industriesoziologischen Diskussion; in: *Marxistische Studien, Jahrbuch des IMSF* 7, 130-153.
- Peter, Lothar (2009): "Gutes Leben" oder "Gerechtigkeit"? Anmerkungen zu Francois Dubet u.a.: "Ungerechtigkeiten. Zum subjektiven Ungerechtigkeitsempfinden am Arbeitsplatz", *Z*, 79, 136-144.
- Pfeiffer, Sabine (2003): Informatisierung, Arbeitsvermögen und Subjekt: Konzeptuelle Überlegungen zu einer emanzipationsorientierten Analyse von (informatisierter) Arbeit; in: K. Schönberger and S. Springer, *Subjektivierter Arbeit: Mensch - Technik - Organisation in einer entgrenzten Arbeitswelt*, Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 182-210.
- Pfeiffer, Sabine (2004): Ein? Zwei? -- Viele! ... und noch mehr Arbeitsvermögen! Ein arbeitssoziologisches Plädoyer für die Reanimation der Kategorie des Arbeitsvermögens als Bedingung einer kritikfähigen Analyse von (informatisierter) Arbeit; in: D. Baatz, C. Rudolph and A. Satilmis, *Hauptsache Arbeit? Feministische Perspektiven auf den Wandel von Arbeit. Arbeit -- Demokratie -- Geschlecht Band 1*, Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 212-226.
- Pialoux, Michel (2005): Der alte Arbeiter und die neue Fabrik; in: P. Bourdieu and e. al., *Das Elend der Welt*, Stuttgart: UTB, 183-197.
- Pietrantoni, Andrea (2007/2008): *Strategie manageriali di gestione di lavoro. Il caso della grande distribuzione a Milano*, Doctoral Thesis, University of Milan.
- Pignoloni, Leonardo (2006): *Salute e sicurezza dei lavoratori nella Grande Distribuzione Organizzata*, Jesi: IRES-Marche.
- Piore, Michael and Charles Sabel (1985): *Das Ende der Massenproduktion*, Berlin: Fischer.
- Poli, Nicoletta and Giuseppe Sciortino (1995): *Flessibilità nel lavoro, flessibilità della vita. Il lavoro a tempo parziale nella grande distribuzione commerciale in Emilia-Romagna*, Bari: Cacucci Editore.
- Pongratz, Hans J. and G. Günter Voß (1998): Der Arbeitskraftunternehmer. Eine neue Grundform der "Ware Arbeitskraft"? *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 50, 1, 131-158.
- Pongratz, Hans J. and G. Günter Voß (2003): *Arbeitskraftunternehmer. Erwerbsorientierungen in entgrenzten Arbeitsformen*, Berlin: Hans Böckler Stiftung, Edition Sigma.
- Porro (2004): Tra trappole e opportunità, *Lavori. Quaderni di rassegna sindacale: I lavoratori temporanei*, 2, 237-242.
- Potter, Jonathan and Margaret Wetherell (1995): Discourse analysis; in: J. Smith, R. Harré and R. van Langenhove, *Rethinking Methods in Psychology*, London: Sage.
- Potz, Petra (2002): *Die Regulierung des Einzelhandels in Italien. Grundlagen und Einfluss auf die Handelsstruktur*, Discussion Paper FS I 02-104, Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung.

- precari della ricerca: <http://precaridellaricerca.wordpress.com/>.
- precari della ricerca (2007): *Cosa cambia per i precari*, <http://www.slideshare.net/andreacapocci/il-protocollo-sul-welfare-2007-120254/>.
- Regalia, Ida (1995): Italy: The Costs and Benefits of Informality; in: J. Rogers and S. Wolfgang, *Works Councils: Consultation, Representation and Cooperation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 217-241.
- Regalia, Ida and Marino Regini (2002): Collective Bargaining and Social Pacts in Italy. Italian chapter for the cross-national study of industrial relations systems; in: H. Katz, *Tripartite Dialogue and Labour Policies: Essential or Irrelevant*, <http://users.unimi.it/mr/pdf/paper4.pdf>.
- Regalia, Ida and Marino Regini (2004): Collective Bargaining and social pacts in Italy. Italian chapter for the cross-national study of industrial relations systems; in: H. Katz, *Tripartite Dialogue and Labour Policies: Essential or Irrelevant*, Ithaca/New York: Cornell University Press.
- Regalia, Ida Regalia (2006): New Forms of Employment and New Problems of Regulation; in: I. Regalia, *Regulating new forms of employment and social innovation in Europe*, New York: Routledge/EUI Studies in the Political Economy of the Welfare State, 14-29.
- Reitz, Tilman (2003): Die Sorge um sich und niemand anderen. Foucault als Vordenker neoliberaler Vergesellschaftung, *Das Argument* 249, 82-97.
- Reyneri, Emilio (2002): *Sociologia del mercato del lavoro*, Bologna: Mulino.
- Reyneri, Emilio (2002a): Occupazione e disoccupazione: le due Italie a confronto con l'Europa; in: A. Besussi and L. Leonini, *L'Europa tra società e politica*, Milano: Guerini e associati.
- Reyneri, Emilio (2009): *Intervista a Emilio Reyneri: ammortizzatori sociali, welfare e giovani*, <http://www.polisblog.it/post/4345/intervista-a-emilio-reyneri-ammortizzatori-sociali-welfare-e-giovani>, 27-04-2009.
- Reyneri, Emilio (2009a): *Intervista a Emilio Reyneri, seconda parte: il libro verde sul Welfare, il suk delle deroghe e le colpe dei sindacati*, <http://www.polisblog.it>, 29 aprile 2009.
- Rieser, Vittorio (2004): Qualità del lavoro e precarietà nella percezione dei soggetti, *Economia & Lavoro*, 38 (2/3), 135-145.
- Ritzer, George (1995): *The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life*, Newbury: Pine Forge Press.
- Rose, Nikolas (1999): *Governing the Soul. The Shaping of the Private Self*, London: Free Association Books.
- Rose, Nikolas (2000): Tod des Sozialen? Eine Neubestimmung der Grenzen des Regierens; in: U. Bröckling, S. Krasmann and T. Lemke, *Gouvernementalität der Gegenwart. Studien zur Ökonomisierung des Sozialen*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 72-109.
- Rousseau (2000): *Psychological Contract Inventory*, Technical Report, Pittsburgh: Heinz School of Public Policy and Graduate School of Industrial Administration Carnegie Mellon University, [http://www.andrew.cmu.edu/user/rousseau/0\\_reports/PCI.pdf](http://www.andrew.cmu.edu/user/rousseau/0_reports/PCI.pdf).
- Rousseau and Tijoriwala (1998): Assessing Psychological Contracts. Issues, Alternatives and Measures, *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*.
- Rubery, Jill (1999): *The Shaping of Work and Working Time in the Service Sector*, conference paper, "International Working Party on Labour Market Segmentation", Bremen.
- Rudolph, Hedwig (2001): *Aldi oder Arkaden? Unternehmen und Arbeit im Europäischen Einzelhandel*, Berlin: sigma.
- Rudolph, Hedwig and Anne Schüttpelz (2001): Europäische Strukturen im Einzelhandel; in: H. Rudolph, *Aldi oder Arkaden? Unternehmen und Arbeit im Europäischen Einzelhandel*, Berlin: sigma, 7-21.

- Saba, Tanja and et al. (2006): Modalités de travail à temps plein ou partiel et son influence sur les attitudes et comportements au travail: L'effet médiateur de la violation du contrat psychologique, *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences*, 23 (4), 318-333.
- Sablowski, Thomas (1998): *Italien nach dem Fordismus, Regulation und organische Krise einer kapitalistischen Gesellschaftsformation*, Münster: VSA.
- Sablowski, Thomas (2002): Globalisierung; in: *Historisch-kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, Band 5, Hamburg: Argument.
- Saraceno, Chiara (2002): I paradossi della flessibilità: una prospettiva di genere e generazionale; in: M. Magatti and G. Fullin, *Percorsi di lavoro flessibile*, Roma: Carocci, 220-230.
- Saraceno, C. (2005): Le differenze che contano tra i lavoratori atipici, *Sociologia del Lavoro*, 97, 15-24.
- Sassen, Saskia (2001): *The global city*, New York/London/Tokyo: Princeton University Press.
- Sauer, Dieter (2008): "Du bist Kapitalismus" oder die Widersprüche der Ökonomisierung; in: K.-S. Rehberg, *Die Natur der Gesellschaft. Verhandlungen des 33. Kongresses der DGS in Kassel 2006*, Teil 1, Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 609-621.
- Schiek, Daniela (2008): "Weisste ja, kannst deine Perspektiven abschätzen." Eine subjektorientierte Betrachtung prekärer Arbeit; in: C. Altenhain, *Von "Neuer Unterschicht" und Prekarität. Gesellschaftliche Verhältnisse und Kategorien im Umbruch. Kritische Perspektiven auf aktuelle Debatten*, Bielefeld: transcript, 95-106.
- Schizzerotto, A. (2002): *Vite ineguali. Disuguaglianze e corsi di vita nell'Italia contemporanea*, Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Schmid, G. and K. Schömann (2003): *The Concept of Transitional Labour Markets and Some Policy Conclusions: The State of the Art*, TLM.NET Working Paper.
- Schumann, Michael (2001): Ausgrenzung statt Solidarität?, Auswirkungen von neuer Arbeitspolitik in der Industrie, *Supplement der Zeitschrift Sozialismus*, 2, 1-10.
- Schumann, Michael (2003): *Metamorphosen von Industriearbeit und Arbeiterbewusstsein. Kritische Industriesoziologie zwischen Taylorismusanalyse und Mitgestaltung innovativer Arbeitspolitik*, Hamburg: VSA.
- Schüttpelz, Anne and Alev Deniz (2001): Beschäftigungsentwicklung im Europäischen Einzelhandel; in: H. Rudolph, *Aldi oder Arkaden? Unternehmen und Arbeit im Europäischen Einzelhandel*, Berlin: sigma.
- Schütz, Alfred (1971): Strukturen der Lebenswelt; in: I. Schütz, *Gesammelte Aufsätze III. Studien zur phänomenologischen Philosophie*, Den Haag: Nijhoff, 152-170.
- Sciortino, Raffaele (2008): Il nuovo asse Lega-Tremonti, *spazioalternativo*, 2008-05-05, [http://www.spazioalternativo.info/2008\\_05\\_01\\_archive.html](http://www.spazioalternativo.info/2008_05_01_archive.html).
- Sciortino, Raffaele (2008a): L'organizzazione del proletariato immigrato in Italia; in: P. Basso and F. Perocco, *Gli immigrati in Europa. Diseguaglianze, razzismo, lotte*, 3rd edition, Roma/Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Sciortino, Raffaele (2008b): La prima crisi veramente globale?, *carta*, 2008-10-02, <http://www.carta.org/campagne/dal+mondo/15223>.
- Sciortino, Raffaele (2010): La trappola perfetta di Marchionne. Ancora sulla vicenda Pomigliano, *infoaut*, 2010-06-14, <http://www.infoaut.org/articolo/la-trappola-perfetta-di-marchionne-ancora-sulla-vicenda-pomigliano>.
- Semenza, Roberta (2004): *Le trasformazioni del lavoro. Flessibilità, disuguaglianze, responsabilità dell'impresa*, Roma: Carocci.
- Sennett, Richard (1976): *The Fall of Public Man*, London: Knopf.
- Simonazzi, A. and P. Villa (2007): Le stagioni della vita lavorativa e il tramonto del "sogno americano" delle famiglie italiane; in: P. Villa, *Generazioni flessibili. Nuove e vecchie forme di esclusione sociale*, Roma: Carocci.
- Springer, Roland (1999): *Rückkehr zum Taylorismus, Arbeitspolitik in der Automobilindustrie*

- am Scheideweg, Frankfurt/Main: Campus.
- Stone, Katherine van Wezel (2004): *From Widgets to Digits: employment regulation for the changing workplace*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thies, Sebastian and Olaf Kaltmeier (2008): *From the Flap of a Butterfly's Wing in Brazil to a Tornado in Texas?: Approaching the Field of Identity Politics and Its Fractal Topography*, conference paper, "Inauguralkonferenz der Forschungsgruppe 'E Pluribus Unum. Ethnische Identitäten in transnationalen Integrationsprozessen in den Amerikas'", Universität Bielefeld, Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Forschung, [www.uni-bielefeld.de/\(de\)/ZIF/FG/2008Pluribus/veroeffentlichungen.html](http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/(de)/ZIF/FG/2008Pluribus/veroeffentlichungen.html).
- Thompson, P., D. Van Der Broek and G. Callaghan (2004): *Keeping Up Appearances: Recruitment, Skills and Normative Control in Call Centres*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Tiddi, Andrea (2001): *Precari. Percorsi di vita tra lavoro e non-lavoro*, B. I. N. Italia, Roma: Derive Approdi.
- Trautwein-Kalms, Gudrun (1995): *Ein Kollektiv von Individualisten? Interessenvertretung neuer Beschäftigtengruppen*, Berlin: edition sigma.
- Traxler, F. (1996): Collective Bargaining and Industrial Change: A Case of Disorganization?, *European Sociological Review*, 12, 271–287.
- Virno, Paolo (2005): *Grammatik der Multitude. Öffentlichkeit, Intellekt und Arbeit als Lebensform*, Wien: Turia+Kant.
- Vogel, Berthold (2009): Das Prekariat - eine neue soziale Lage; in: R. Castel and K. Dörre, *Prekarität, Abstieg, Ausgrenzung. Die soziale Frage am Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt/M: Campus, 197-208.
- Voß, G. Günter (1998): Die Entgrenzung von Arbeit und Arbeitskraft. Eine subjektorientierte Interpretation des Wandels der Arbeit., *Mitteilungen aus der Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung*, 31, 3, 473-487.
- Voß, G. Günter (2002): Der Arbeitskraftunternehmer, Ein neuer Typus von Arbeitskraft und seine sozialen Folgen; in: H. Reichold, A. Löhr and G. Blickle, *Wirtschaftsbürger oder Marktopfer? Neue Beschäftigungsverhältnisse - ein Risiko für Gesellschaft, Recht und Ethik?*, Mering/München: Hampp, 15-32.
- Voss-Dahm, Dorothea (2000): *"Dienstleistungstaylorismus" und veränderte Anforderungen an die Arbeitszeitorganisation: das Beispiel Einzelhandel*, conference paper, "The Economics and Socio-economics of Services: International Perspectives", Lille/Roubaix, 2000-06-22,23.
- Voss-Dahm, Dorothea (2003): Zwischen Kunden und Kennziffern - Leistungspolitik in der Verkaufsarbeit des Einzelhandels; in: Pohlmann et al., *Dienstleistungsarbeit auf dem Boden der Tatsachen. Befunde aus Handel, Industrie, Medien und IT-Branche*, Berlin: sigma, 67-111.
- Walters, Sally (2005): Making the best of a bad job? Female part-timers' orientations and attitudes to work, *Gender, Work and Organization*, 12 (3), 193-216.
- Warhurst and Nickson (2007): Employee experience of aesthetic labour in retail and hospitality, *Work, Employment, Society*, 21, 103-120.
- Wilthagen, Ton (2010): *Flexicurity in the crisis: the case of short-time working arrangements*, conference paper, European Employment Observatory, Occasional Workshop on Short-Time Working Arrangements, 2010-01-13, <http://www.eu-employment-observatory.net/resources/meetings/Wilthagen-STWA-Presentation.pdf>.
- Witzel, Andreas (1985): Das problemzentrierte Interview; in: G. Jüttemann, *Qualitative Forschung in der Psychologie*, Weinheim: Beltz, 227-255.
- Witzel, Andreas (2000): The problem-centred interview, *Forum Qualitative Social Research*, 1 (1).
- Wright, Steve (2005): *Den Himmel stürmen. Eine Theoriegeschichte des Operaismus*, Berlin/Hamburg: Assoziation A.

Zanderighi, Luca (2003): Italy; in: S. Howe, *Retailing in the European Union. Structures, competition and performance*, London: Routledge, 102-125.

## List of Tables

Table 1: Levels of analysis	p. 38
Table 2: A subject-oriented approach to Labour process Theory	p. 43
Table 3: Theoretical frame - key insights for approaching a subject's (labour) practices	p. 44
Table 4: Subject-oriented insights from current labour studies	p. 120
Table 5: Labour market flexibilisation in Italy since 1990	p. 134
Table 6: Post-war development of Italian labour relations	p. 145
Table 7: Background interviews per retail branch and firm structure	p. 155
Table 8a: Characteristics of interviewed employees I	p. 159
Table 8b: Characteristics of interviewed employees II	p. 160
Table 9: Flexibilisation, participation and unionisation in the four case studies	p. 162
Table 10: Unionisation and bargaining power in the four case studies	p. 206
Table 11a: Formal and informal flexibilisation and subjectification in G and C	p. 207
Table 11b: Formal and informal flexibilisation and subjectification in I and D	p. 208
Table 12: Differences in the strength and focus of conflict experiences per firm	p. 272
Table 13: Different conflict experiences and employee characteristics	p. 273
Table 14: Cumulative distribution of employees across coping patterns	p. 348
Table 15: Combinations of conflict experiences and individual coping patterns	p. 350
Table 16: Combinations of individual and collective coping patterns	p. 399
Table 17: Combinations of conflict experiences and collective coping patterns	p. 400
Table 18: Main outcomes for each set of research questions	p. 416
Table 19: Differences in conflict experiences and coping practices - combined influencing factors	p. 422
Table 20: Employees characteristics	p. 445

## Appendix 1: List of interviewed employees

*Table 20: Employees characteristics*

	<b>Firm</b>	<b>Contract</b>	<b>Job title</b>	<b>Union affiliation</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Living situation</b>
Laura	D	temporary part-time	salesclerk	none	30	Highschool degree	alone
Stefania	D	permanent part-time	salesclerk	none	33	University student	parents
Marco	D	permanent full-time	stock operator	none	40	Lower secondary school	partner
Alice	D	permanent full-time	cashier	none	28	Highschool degree	partner
Valentina	D	permanent part-time	cashier	none	31	Highschool degree	family
Giuseppe	I	permanent part-time	stock operator	CGIL	32	Lower secondary school	unknown
Luis	I	permanent part-time	stock operator	CGIL	38	unknown	alone
Gianni	I	temporary part-time	salesclerk	none	23	University student	parents
Maria	I	temporary part-time	cashier	none	20	Highschool student	parents
Chiara	C1	permanent part-time	cashier	UIL	20	Lower secondary school	partner
Cristina	C1	permanent part-time	cashier	UIL	38	Highschool degree	family
Luca	C1	permanent part-time	salesclerk	none	25	unknown	unknown
Elena	C2	permanent part-time	cashier	CGIL	42	Lower secondary school	family
Cristian	C2	permanent full-time	salesclerk	CGIL (shop steward)	28	Highschool degree	partner
Mimmo	C2	interim worker	promoter	(ex-CGIL)	30	unknown	parents
Daniele	G	permanent part-time	salesclerk	CGIL	27	University degree	alone
André	G	permanent part-time	salesclerk	CGIL	23	Highschool degree	alone
Mario	G	permanent part-time contract	cashier	CGIL	27	Highschool degree	parents
Erik	G	permanent full-time	cashier	CGIL (shop steward)	27	Lower secondary school	partner

## Appendix 2: Interview guideline for the employee interviews

### A: WORK HISTORY, EMPLOYMENT CONDITION + CONTRACT FLEXIBILITY

1.) How did you start working as a sales clerk or cashier at this shop? How did this happen and how was it like?

2.) What kind of a contract do you have at the moment and with what kind of contracts did you work before (for the same or at another company)?

3.) Can you tell me how your life is affected by such a (flexible, precarious) employment status? What does it mean to you to be employed on the basis of a temporary contract (and/or part-time)?

#### → Possible follow-up questions:

##### a) Work-life-balance:

- What is significant about your employment (+ life situation) situation?  
What are the positive and negative aspects of having a temporary/part-time contract?
- What does it mean to work part-time if you have a temporary contract?
- Has it been your own choice to work with a flexible contract and/or part-time? For how long can you imagine continuing to work with such a contract? How do you imagine your employment conditions in 10 years?

##### b) Employment insecurity

- (Can you imagine) what will happen when your contract expires? (→ or for permanent staff: What do you think about employment security? Do you feel safe about your job and is this important for you? Why (not)? → support networks, your own position on the labour market?
- How is the expiration/non-prolongation of contracts dealt with in your firm?
- What do you think in this context about the Italian welfare state + labour politics/legge 30?

c) Effects on work experiences, attitudes + identification

- Do you enjoy working as a sales clerk? Is it important to you? And working at this precise work place and company: Do you feel attached to it?

d) Relation between colleagues + collective interest representation/action

- Can you describe the relation/atmosphere between colleagues with different employment status?
- Are (the different) employment conditions/contracts an issue in your conversations with colleagues? → Can you describe the atmosphere/reaction among colleagues when a temporary contract of a colleague does not get renewed? Can you remember any solidarity action or any instance where such a management decision was opposed by colleagues?
- Do you have an idea what existing collective contracts (first or second or shop level) say about the use of flexible forms of employment/part-time? What do you think about it?
- Do you know about any positions, strategies, and actions of the shop stewards and/or unions with regard to flexible/part-time employment? → Have you heard about the confederation of organisations for precarious workers (Nidil-CGIL, Alai-CISL, Cpo-UIL)? What do you think about them? → Have you ever heard of “San Precario” and/or the “Mayday-Parade?” If yes, what do you think about such initiatives?
- Did you ever participate in any union mobilisation? And/or did you ever consult a union representative/shop steward? Are you a union member? → ”What is your form of strike?”

e) Summarising: understandings of precariousness

- Would you describe your employment situation as precarious?
- What does (the term) “precariousness” mean to you?
- How would you describe the relevance/diffusion of flexible and/or part-time employment in today’s society?
- Do you see any need for their limitation/regulation or a political intervention?



## B: EVERYDAY WORK EXPERIENCES, WORK ORGANISATION + LABOUR CONTROL

Can you tell me about your work? I'd like to understand from your point of view what it is like/it means to work as a sales clerk/shop assistant/cashier at this shop? Can you please describe in detail a normal work day for you?

→ Possible follow-up questions:

### a) Experiences of work + work organisation:

- What are your precise work tasks? Are they fixed or do they change?
- Would you consider your work as teamwork or do you work alone most of the time?
- Can you describe how decisions are made about what has to be done when and in what way?
- What is your opinion of this kind of work organisation? → What do you think about it?/ What are your experiences: What is positive and negative about it?

### b) Transfer of responsibility, participation + internalisation/self-control

- Do you enjoy working as a sales clerk? Is it important for you? And working at this precise work place and company: Do you feel attached to it?
- What kind of responsibilities do you have regarding your work?/Do you feel responsible for something or in front of somebody during your work? What do you see as your role in the firm?
- Officially, who is held responsible for the performance of the shop and how?
- Does management (try to) transmit responsibility for the shop's economic performance to you employees? Are there any management initiatives to increase your involvement/your participation in the shop's development or your identification with the company?
- How would you describe the management's attitudes towards the employees? (resource or cost)

#### c) Labour control

- Does anybody control the way you do your work and/or your work results?
- Is there any (precise) measurement for what is considered/expected as “good work performance?”

#### d) Relation with supervisors

- Can you tell me about the relation/atmosphere between employees and supervisors? → contacts/ interaction?
- Have you ever experienced a conflict with a supervisor?

#### e) Relations between colleagues, attitudes about collective action, and shop stewards/unions

- Can you tell me about the contact you have with your colleagues? How much interaction/cooperation is there during the work + and beyond/in the life sphere?
- How would you describe the atmosphere between colleagues at your work place? (group<->individuals<->competition?) → Are your colleagues important for you? Conflicts?
- Do you remember any collective conflict with the management (related to the work organisation), a situation in which you all acted together/as a collective to obtain something from the management?
- Do you know about any activities and positions of shop stewards and/or the unions (related to the daily problems you have in the shop and/or to the issues of work organisation and control and/or employment flexibility)? → How would you describe their role/importance/influence (in the shop)?
- Did you ever participate in any union mobilisation/action? And/or did you ever consult a union representative/shop steward? Are you a union member? What is your personal form of strike?

#### f) Relation with clients

- What is it like to do front line service work? Can you describe how the interaction with the clients takes place?
- Do you feel more or less controlled (or rather left alone) in your interaction with the clients? In what respect? Are there any/precise rules how to

behave in front of the clients and/or how to dress/what to look like? (→ formation? Representation of corporate image?)

## C: WORKING TIME + TEMPORAL FLEXIBILITY

Can you describe what a normal work week looks like for you: What is your work time schedule, what are your other activities and duties, and how does your work time combine with the rest of your life?

### a) Work time organisation + flexibility

- Please describe in detail your work time schedule: When do you normally work?/Do you have any fixed schedule?/How flexible are your work hours?
- How + when are work time schedules + overtime hours set? How much influence do you have over this (as an individual or as a group of colleagues)?
- What is your experience with work time flexibility and overtime work? What is positive and negative about them? → What kind of work times would you like to have? → What happens if such flexibility demands are in conflict with your personal time plans + needs? + What happens if you do not accept a change or additional hours?
- Would you think differently about work time flexibility and overtime work if you worked part/full-time or if you had a temporary/open-ended contract?

### b) Interaction with colleagues + collective action/conflicts (see above)

- mutual support + conflicts among colleagues
- collective conflict with management regarding work time
- opinion on unions'/shop stewards' positions + actions

## D: FINAL REMARKS/SUMMARY

- 1.) Reflecting once again on all you told me about your work and life conditions and your experiences of flexibility: → Did I understand you correctly, when I say that the main characteristics + problems + conflicts seem to be...?
- 2.) Thanks a lot for this interview! Maybe you could tell me whether it was easy for you to make the decision to participate in this interview or whether you needed some courage + Why did you decide to participate?
- 3.) QUESTIONNAIRE: information on age, gender, life situation; profession, type of contract + work hours, seniority, wage group, formation + former work experiences, union membership
- 4.) Take CONTACTS for possible second round/discussion!!!

## Appendix 3: Additional interview quotes

### 1. Additional interview quotes referring to employees' conflict experiences

#### *Regarding chapter 7.1.2 The conflicts of individualised informal flexibility regulations: precarising experiences of forced availability*

G08: Yes, ok, I do have a stable contract, but I only do 30 hours a week. So, I don't know when I will manage... You know, I still live with my parents, I am 28 years old, for now this is still acceptable, also the wage. But, the day I decide to live alone: how will I make it? No, no, you just can't make it (G08/male permanent part-time cashier).

C-A15: No, no, I'm married. We've got the credit for the apartment. The part-time wage is a real problem. You absolutely have to be two people to do this (C15/female permanent part-time cashier).

D11A: Well, you have to get along, to maintain yourself. If you are a normal person, you will have to do two jobs. Yes, otherwise I would stick to part-time, too. It would be very fine with me. Doing 40 hours a week is a heavy thing. Physically, but also because you spent too much time at work. And you feel all the problems related to your work much more strongly (D11-A/female temporary part-time sales clerk).

G05: It's not that there are so many alternatives. Where would you go, eh? (...) I've a professional degree as a quantity surveyor. But, if I would try to work in that field, I would have to start from the beginning. Recently, I went to work with a quantity surveyor, to see how it is. No, but you have to start from zero, you have to become an apprentice again, and then you have to be subservient again, they will subordinate you. Only to learn another line of work. And otherwise, what could you do? There is no alternative. Anyway, today, all contracts are like this everywhere. First, a temporary contract, and then, maybe after two years, part-time. There is no sense in starting over like this, only to do a different job, in an office or so (G05/male permanent part-time sales clerk).

#### *Regarding chapter 7.1.2 The conflicts of individualised informal flexibility regulations: precarising experiences of forced availability*

G09: When I was still part-time, I only thought about work. The first thing was work. Everything I had to do outside of work, I adapted everything to the work times they gave me, always at the last moment. Also because, I was really vulnerable to blackmailing then. I was part-time, it was the first period in that job. I couldn't plan my life (G09/male permanent full-time cashier).

G08: I've been sent to work permanently at the cash desks now against my will. Before, I worked in the frozen food department. I've always given any availability requested, when they had to restore the shop, for example. But, at the end of the day, they did send me to work at the cash desks, even though I've told them that I hated that work. They placed me there because, you know, when I worked with the frozen food, after some time, I developed my own rhythm. Because, you always are in contact with cold stuff there. Having the hands always frozen, sometimes I had a break. And maybe, they thought that somebody else would do this job quicker than me, that I wasn't quick enough. So they sent me to the cash desks (G08/male permanent part-time cashier).

#### *Regarding chapter 7.1.3 In detail: conflicts regarding work times*

D14: At the cash desk, you always finish later than what would be the official end of your turn. Obviously, you have to finish with the last customer before leaving. That's logical, ok. But, they never pay for this. They control your work times, but only the start, that you don't arrive too late. But then, they should also check for when you finish! Otherwise there is no justice (D14/female permanent part-time cashier).

(...)

*'What disturbs me most is that certain things are just forced on us. It's against any rule to impose a timetable like that (D14/female permanent part-time cashier).*

*G05: One day, they make you do lots of overtime. And then, the next day, they tell you that the department has an excess of work hours for the next week. And they ask you to take a week of holidays right now. Are you crazy? You want to send me on holiday just like that, from one day to the other? I have my holidays scheduled for the end of the month. And I won't burn the rest of my free days just like that, just because you decide it. Only because it suits you. Without getting anything in return (G05/male permanent part-time sales clerk).*

*G09: While I was part-time, I still lived with my parents. (...) I did double turns, split shifts, had to spend 3, 4 hours hanging around in between. When I worked at the fish counter, I got my time tables for the next week only on Saturdays. (...) There was nobody who would have told me that this was not correct that I had to do these damn shifts, that I had a right to have regular work times (G09/male permanent full-time cashier).*

*D11S: Before, work times were very flexible, with unforeseen changes from one day to the other, even without any notice. But now, the planning is very rigid. Times are still irregular, but you can't change anything anymore. You can't come to terms with your department chef anymore, can't negotiate. I definitely preferred the flexible rule. With time, you can get used to flexibility. As long as you are part-time, it's no problem, you have so much free time (D11-S/female permanent part-time sales clerk).*

*C15: The only really negative thing about my work that comes to my mind are work times. Above all, because of Sundays. With the new kind of contracts we have now, you have to do 3 Sundays per month. Only one you can stay at home. (...) And, since I finally got the permanent contract, I always have to work late in the afternoon, from 4 or 5pm to 9pm. Always the same fixed hours, that's really ugly, boring, tiring (C-A15/female permanent part-time cashier).*

#### **Regarding chapter 7.1.4 In detail: conflicts concerning functional flexibility, work tasks, and qualifications**

*G09: Imagine that I should stay for a forth level payment at the fish counter all day. In winter you destroy your health doing that work because you have to put your hands in the ice. And also you have to get up at 6 to prepare the counter. You have to take two enormous boxes of ice and distribute them all over. My fingernails always got broken by the cold (G09/male permanent full-time cashier).*

*G08: You know, work with frozen food is not something you can do all day. Shit, it's impossible that it was always me alone who had to do that job. It would have been fine, if I could have done the frozen stuff during the morning, when it comes in, and then work also at some fresh food counter or something like that. Or do it one day, and then the next day it could have been my colleague, the department head, taking over. But no, always only me, me, me (G08/male permanent part-time cashier).*

*I20: ...it would be enough to think a bit. The packing of the tables for example. Tables normally go with 4 or 6 chairs. But, the packages are made of 5 chairs each. So you always have to open them. (...) At least give me a package that corresponds to the norm! They say it's difficult, because they would have to ask the supplier, and then it becomes a whole chain, so that they couldn't change anything. And then you say 'stop, that's ridiculous.' There are also stories about the weight of packages. Take the packages of a wardrobe, for example. The glasses are very heavy, say they have 38kg, but they are all packed together. And the second package has only 12kg. That's stupid. But they are only interested in a maximum reduction of the overall volume, that's what they gain from this (I20/male permanent part-time stock operator).*

*D14: The fact is that this is a holiday period. That's why we are few in at the cash desks. Being few means having to also do the work of those who are missing. So, you really can find very long, tremendous queues. And I assure you that you are really stressed after your four hours at the desk. This*

affects also the way you deal with the customers. (...) At the end, you just hope they'll all be gone as quickly as possible. (...) In fact, this happens each time the shop is full, not only during the summer holidays (D14/female permanent part-time cashier).

G05: Before, the truck arrived at midday, which was our regular work time. Maybe it was late one hour, and we had to wait. But only an hour or so, and then unload the truck. That was fine. Now, they were not happy with this, they just changed it. They decided to make the truck arrive in the afternoon. It should arrive at 2pm now. But you never know precisely, maybe you have to wait until 4 o'clock and then unload until 6pm. Why? (G05/male permanent part-time sales clerk)

G05: I had a whole discussion with my director. I work in the beverage department. One morning, some colleagues were reordering all the water bottles, all the water stuff was in the place where I would have had to work. So I couldn't do my work and started to help them, to get it done quicker. It was a big mess. At eight the market opens: 'Could you help me here, we have to clean up, have to hurry, we'll open right now, shit.' There has to be some order, you know. I still had to start doing my work, (to stock up fruit juices), hey! There comes the director, tells us that we would have to take away the posters of the last sales that had just finished. At that point I got really angry. I said, not really in a loud voice, but he heard it anyway: 'Everybody is just good in talking here' (...) All the shelves are empty here, plastic and cartons everywhere. You tell us to do this and that, but you are talking from outside, you don't know what's really happening in here (G05/male permanent part-time sales clerk).

I20: Well, I think that's what they do: throwing away so many persons. Because, for me, giving so many work tasks to each single person means doing a lot of things badly. You don't get to know doing one thing well. For example, if you are employed to drive the trolleys in the stocks, then they will try to put you also on the fork-lift. And there aren't any specific training courses either. It's true that you learn a lot by doing it. But, there are so many things, for example when we do the unloading, there is no automatic registration. The same for the de-registration, when you take away something from the stocks. There are so many errors made, because the young guys don't get to learn these specific tasks any more. You want to save time, but in the end you make a much bigger mistake (I20/male permanent part-time stock operator).

### **Regarding chapter 7.2.1 Direct control:**

C16: To work with money from others is never easy. You often think: let's hope I didn't do a mistake. Once, I had 100€ missing. They sent me a disciplinary letter and then I was called to the director. I explained my view on what happened and then it finished there. (...) To send these letters, I think that's just the normal procedure, to control. (...) You know, at the end of the day, before leaving the cash desk, I do have to do certain operations. But, I never know whether that day I've had some shortfalls or some excess money. I just have to wait that they come and tell me. But, honestly, when they tell you three weeks later that there was some money missing, you just don't remember what might have been the reason. They will ask you, sure, but how should you do that, remember everything you did throughout all 5 work hours? It's just impossible (C16/female permanent part-time cashier).

C18: First of all, what is important for me is to see that I'm in front of a person. I don't like this rule that the customer is always right. Because, very often, any stupid guy can come in here and cause disorder. Trying to let the customer leave the shop satisfied is a good thing. It's important, personally, not for the firm, to do a decent work. I'm always very polite, I do accompany customers in other departments which aren't mine. (...) But, this is also a cultural problem here, in Italy everybody thinks that by shouting you can obtain everything (C18/male interim worker part-time promoter).

D11S: During the initial job training they told us, above all, how to sell well, not trying to sell as much as possible, but the satisfaction of the customer should be the most important thing. But, in reality this is not very well respected, especially by superiors. What I think is that this is precisely what doing a good service, doing good work, means: Selling only what the customers really wants to buy and selling good products. This is how I understand my work. But this is not how things work here. Here, the only

*important thing is to increase turnover. Some superiors try to put themselves in a good light by selling as much as possible, to have a better place in the rankings. They even use illicit ways, changing product offers and contents of packages for example. Only to make 1€ more. They don't care anymore what the customers might want to buy, to sell good products (D11S/female permanent part-time sales clerk).*

### **Regarding chapter 7.2.3 Indirect control and the criticism of participatory management strategies as fake**

*C-C16: For us at the cash desks, management never does any assemblies to tell us about firm results or such stuff. If we do any assemblies, these are union assemblies. In 5 years that I'm here, I have never seen... well, ok, now they do a training course with us, because we get new cash desks, to learn how these new ones work. But besides that, nothing (C16/female permanent part-time cashier).*

*C16: Organising a dinner, they do that only once a year, around Christmas. Yes, they try to do family, but things like that only once a year. Nothing else, that's nothing serious, really (C-C16/female permanent part-time cashier).*

*D11A: I can't participate at any of these things, temporary employees aren't even considered there! (D11A/female temporary part-time sales clerk)*

*I20: When there are ideas coming up from the shop floor, they might also be difficult to be put into place, because there's a whole system... But, generally, it would be enough to think a bit. The packing of the tables for example. (...) At the end, you don't complain about these issues anymore at all, because you know, whether you give your opinion or not, things won't get improved (I20/male permanent part-time stock operator).*

*I21: During the first years, I still went to these dinners, the fests. But, I've seen that it doesn't help at all, not at all. What they spend for all these fests, this is a place where people are afraid to talk, but this firm earns millions of euros, and 70% of its employees do part-time jobs and are precarious, and that's not fair. All this money they spend, they should better try to give people more work hours, because that's what people need. I'm somebody who has responsibilities, too, maybe, no?!  
(...)*

*I do work all Sundays, also Saturdays. For the same reason: because, if you do not work Sundays, then they say that you do not show enough corporate identity. (...) I never got anything here. I did so many sacrifices here. I did any overtime work they asked me to do. Then, for a year, they blocked me and I couldn't do any overtime at all anymore, because I had done too much. I accepted all the work times they gave me. But I've never received anything in return (I21/male permanent part-time warehousemen).*

*D12R: Since recently we do not manage to take any awards anymore. Management somehow changed the system of bonuses, these bonuses linked to firm results. Now it's impossible to get them. Now, we don't move above the basic wage anymore.  
(...)*

*The human treatment at D really doesn't have any comparison anywhere else. They try to give us all these benefits to make us work more. For us, in the warehouse, we do have the gym paid by the firm, they go on trips with us, they pay us the theatre, soccer cups. The firm spends, according to me they have a budget only for the warehouse for these things of about 5000€ each month. Instead of giving the money to us as a wage, they use it pay all these things. They want to kiss your ass with this stuff. Together with our direct superiors, management tries to do in a way that there are no reasons for stress, no problems during our work day. (...) They are very clever, when they want us to work more. But they never ever increase our wages. That's just bullshit (D12R/male permanent full-time stock operator).*

*C18: The status of a promoter is very vaguely defined. (...) And your supervisor is never present. (...) They do these things on purpose. It's typically Italian. This way, when you try to complain about something, they'll always say: 'No, sorry, but you've said... that other person has said...' And it's just not*



true. These are all multinationals now, if you try to complain it's always the fault of the others, the English, the French. Like that, you can never arrive at anything (C18/male interim worker part-time promoter).

D11S: Everything was quite fine until this last change of our department head. This is a very fundamental thing that your well-being depends on the one and only person you have in front of yourself. That there is no general rule that these things (such as imposed work times) can't go above a certain limit... (D11S/female permanent part-time sales clerk)

D14: You always have to restart again with a new guy, to build up relations, to obtain a relation of respect and compromise (D14/female permanent part-time cashier).

## 2. Further interview quotes referring to individual coping practices

### *Regarding chapter 8.1.1 Rule internalisation, good work, and fair exchange*

G06: They do not want to employ anybody anymore. And what is more, they do not even want to increase our work hours. If I do my 30 hours per week, and they need more work, it's not that they would tell you 'ok, come on, we'll give you a contract of 36 or 38 hours. No, you come here and we let you do some overtime hours, just when they want it. When they don't want it, enough, you do your regular hours and that's it.

Int: When do they ask you for doing overtime: the same day or before?

G06: Sometimes they inform me before, but maybe some day I show up for work and find out that my colleague can't come because she's ill. That day, if I want to do overtime hours, I stay. If I have something to do outside work, bye bye, it's them (management) to find a solution. They manage by themselves then.

(...)

Int: They know that you need those overtime hours?

G06: Yes, that's why I say yes. (...) Secure employment would mean to have a full-time job, and a permanent contract. But, if you are part-time... . One of my colleagues doesn't manage to buy an apartment, she just can't manage it, it's difficult. I did a sacrifice (he bought an apartment). It's not that I like it so much, this situation, because often, what else should I do, well, then I accept these overtime shifts. Because by the end of the month I need to have earned that money. Inside, I feel that I am obliged to say yes. Because, if I say no, at the end, how do I manage to pay?

(G6/male permanent part-time sales clerk)

G06: There are some department heads that go and talk badly about their staff in front of the director. There are others like my department head who always defends her boys. It's a great luck, that she always defends us. Because we do a good work, it's not that there is need to defend....

(G6/male permanent part-time sales clerk)

G09: Mobbing, in my opinion that was mobbing. Because, you do a certain work, there are various professions, for every wage level there are specific functions and tasks. From the moment that my task doesn't correspond with my wage level, and this for a long time; well, even I do know this, they would have to wake up and say: You deserve something or you don't. But with these little promises....

(G09/male permanent full-time cashier)

### *Regarding chapter 8.1.2 Practices of separation and distinction*

I19: Every month there is an assembly for about one hour. We speak about how things go, what news there are, like restructuring the shop. That's a good thing, to be informed. At least in that way some changes or new things don't get you on the wrong foot. And there is also, within that small world, some satisfaction if the department runs well, even if that doesn't give you any more money in your pockets. We also can give a suggestion when things don't run well. Obviously, it's them who decides whether to

adopt any suggestions or not. But that's fine, they have to take care that proposed things are feasible and correct (I19/male temporary part-time sales clerk).

Int: Would you like to become, for example, department head?

D12A: Well, I think it's a bit sad that I am still stuck here, always at the same qualification and wage level, the same as those who just started working here. I really don't like it to be still put on the same level as the newcomers, after four years of experience in the job. That is, they think that we are equal. But I don't think so. Maybe, even my superior tells me: 'No, listen, of course, you are always a step higher.' Yes, but officially, on paper, we are just the same, pay is just the same. Yes, this is frustrating. On the other hand, I'm also fine like this, in this position.

D12R: With all the experience and the competences, also in informatics, always regarding the cashes, anyway, all the experiences she gained in four years, they should be recognised by a higher qualification level.

D12A: Yes, you know, they even call me at home if there are some problems with the operations at the cash desks, because, I really know these things. This is frustrating, that I still remain on this fourth level as a cashier and hostess. So, I'm always equal to those who just started working the other day and don't know anything about these things.

D12R: But, come on, you could negotiate this damn third level with your superior, no?!

D12A: But, no, they would have to give me a new contract then. Because, exactly on the contract it's written: if my professional role remains the same, I can't have more than a fourth level. (In the individual contract the official work task and the corresponding wage level are defined)

Union officer: You would have to become department head?

D12A: Yes, yes, by contract. (...) I do the time schedules for all the cashiers. That's something the department head should do.

Union officer: Well, theoretically, with these extra- tasks, if you would engage in a court trial, the judge should give you even a second level, not only a third.

D12A: Hey, listen, how nice.

D12R: Well, he told you what to do.

D12A: Yes, sure, now I go to court and then they fire me

(D12A/female permanent full-time cashier, D12R/male permanent full-time stock operator).

D12R: These personal interviews are useful (...) to solve interpersonal problems, or things like 'I don't like to do this and that specific work because my arm hurts, for these things it works. Well, I have the opportunity to tell her (the department head) and she will try to help me, to make me do some other kind of work with the other arm. This yes, it works. And they (the management) put a lot of stress on these things. Like, if me and another guy don't work well together, the department head will call us, will make us talk with each other, will force us to look each other in the face, to find a solution together, at least for the moment, and then we will see later on. Nothing escapes their attention. (...) It's all a paradise, an idyll, besides for the wage. (...) Last time they did these interviews with us, we all declared that we wanted more money and an additional break of 10 minutes. They gave us the break, because, at the end, they do have to take account of what we all say in these interviews. But no money, never any money

(D12R/male permanent full-time warehousemen).

#### **Regarding chapter 8.1.4 Conflict reduction**

C16: No, in my opinion, absolutely not. But, this is what the firm policy is. So, you have to adapt to that. But, I think, that's the same in all supermarkets, not just in this company  
(C-C16/female permanent part-time cashier).

#### **Regarding chapter 8.2.1 Appropriation of meaning: service pride and personalisation**

C16: I work only to live, even if I really like my work. But I definitely don't live to work.

Int: Well then, does this mean that there is a limit for the availability you give?

C16: Yes, sure. Because, in my opinion, it's fine to work, it's fine to do overtime, but I also do have a

private life. The first thing is my private life. The second is my work. If I know that there are any problems, I give priority to private life. Work comes only afterwards. That is, if I have some problems, I don't give any availability  
(C-C16/female permanent part-time cashier).

C16: Recently, I really have more than enough with my 24 hours, believe me. Recently, we are really few people at the cash desks. I do, let's say, 5 hours per day and I swear that I am really, really tired afterwards.

Int: Yes, I see. But, tell me, after so many years of experience, doesn't one find some own ways to reduce stress when work gets really heavy? I don't know, like going to toilet very often...

C16: Well, look, me, in 5 years, even if I was really tired, I've never ever asked to have any additional break, additional to the one they give us. I always try to be in the time they give me  
(C-C16/female permanent part-time cashier).

Int: Does it cause any difficulties with this mixed shift to change work times every day of the week?

C16: It's difficult when you do the evening before and the day after the early morning shift. Well, in that case you'll feel a bit messed up, because you don't have time. But, if you do the morning shift and the next day the midday turn there are no problems.

Int: Well, I also thought about your son.

C16: Well, by now, my son is 14 years old. So, he can manage himself, alone. Before it was a bit more difficult, but with the grandparents, I was nonetheless able to manage the situation.  
(C-C16/female permanent part-time cashier)

Int: How does this go together, this authoritarian atmosphere you just described and then the strategies to enhance involvement and family spirit?

D14: There is a lot of hypocrisy in all this stuff of participation, that's evident. It's normal, all these meetings, assemblies, the dinners and trips, they are all there for a management purpose. This comes from high above, higher than the shop director. I never heard about any other firm that organises so many of these things. I don't participate in the trips, but at the dinners yes. Because, from a certain point of view, you have to go to some meeting, because otherwise you'll be cut off from the rest, by superiors and also by colleagues. The problem is that, at work, you are no robot. You have a soul, you need to have some relation with your employer and your colleagues. But, if I can, I avoid these events. And if I can't avoid them, like the Christmas dinner or the meeting for launching some new promotion, well, then you have to go (D14/female permanent part-time cashier).

C16: There is a lot of envy, lot of jealousy. And then, you know, we are so many, so you can recognise those persons you can trust and those you better avoid. You build your little group then, with certain colleagues, and you let go of all the rest, for sure. (...) I have a lot of friends at work with whom I meet often also during the week, we go out together, have dinner or lunch together, go on some trip. Yes, yes.

Int: Is it for this reason then that you said before you would feel attached to this job?

C16: I tell you again: I like this work. And in addition there are these friendships, so, it's become like a family. (...) Firm dinners, we do them only once a year, for Christmas. Yes, they try to make it look as a family here. Well, you know, at the firm level there is only this one dinner. Nothing else. Really, I don't care for these things (C-C16/female permanent part-time cashier).

Int: Do you practice any personal forms of strike then?

D11S: Well, sometimes, like skipping work. But, you know, part-time as such is already much more supportable. There is time to release stress outside work. So, there is not so much need for pretending to be ill.

D11A: I feel it's difficult to skip work too often. Not if I've been really ill, but also when I wasn't well psychologically at my old job. There, you didn't take any days off for being ill.

Int: Why not? Is it a question of responsibility?

D11S: It's a personal question, of feeling in coherence with yourself.

D11A: Well no, in reality I wasn't so bad as not to be able to work. And yet, lots of people fight stress this way, by skipping work

(D11A/female temporary part-time sales clerk, D11S/female permanent part-time sales clerk).

D11S: I've always been fine and relaxed with colleagues. It's only since this last year that there are some elements that give a bit of colour to work hours. Like our current superior and two colleagues who see themselves as future department heads. Especially these two, they compete among each other. They are 200% available, and require this from everybody. For example, they call you to work quicker even in front of a customer. And they are not even department heads yet, just the deputies. One of them always tries to ingratiate. The other always fights. And then, they always decide according to personal sympathy. They absolutely want to show that we are the best department. They try to sell as much as possible, even using illegal ways, like selling things separately which are in an offer together, only to have one euro of additional turnover. Oh, everybody hates them. Sometimes I imagine paying it all back to them. For example conspiring with a customer, make him go and complain about these selling practices. Or to go and slash the tires of their cars.

G05: No, at the cash desks you can't go smoke a cigarette, you can't. A colleague, the other day didn't feel well, or what so ever. He called me and told me: 'I really need to go to toilet, I have to smoke, I feel so bad.' Well, I go and substitute him at the cash desk. I take over his desk for a while. But, if he would have had to ask for this from the department head 'Could you send me a substitution?', maybe he could have waited half an hour, he could have vomited at the desk.

Int: Do you have, let's say, officially the right to substitute him just like that, even though you don't work at the cash department?

G05: It's not that I...

G09: There are certain situations where nobody else could work at your desk, because every cashier has his own code. Because, if there should be any money missing, who will they give fault to? The registered cashier. But, we've got a good relation among each other. For sure, he won't take him off any money from the desk.

G08: No, no, in these circumstances, I wasn't well, I saw him and I asked him to substitute me. But, before leaving for the toilet, anyway, I informed our superior about this substitution.

G09: The practice is that the department head has to be informed. But in a legal sense everybody has his own code and nobody else is allowed to enter it at that desk. In fact, there are also some cashiers whom you propose to give a change, but they say: 'No, no, for me, my desk will be closed down as long as I'm away. I don't want anybody else at my desk.'

G08: That's correct.

G09: In fact, who is it that this practices is convenient to? First of all to the department head. Because, if you take your break and you don't want anybody to substitute you, I have one open desk less for that time. Instead, if you go for your break and there's somebody else at your desk, it seems as if nobody would be missing. It's them who make you do these things. It's not our initiative to say: 'Hey, give me a substitution and I go...' No

(G05/male permanent part-time sales clerk, G08/male permanent part-time cashier, G09/male permanent full-time cashier).

### 3. Further interview quotes referring to collective coping practices

#### *Regarding chapter 9.3 Participation in institutional interest representation 2: Passive participation and lacking cognitive resources*

Int: Last Saturday, there was a strike in this shop, right? What would you say, how was the participation?

G06: Yes, there were a lot who participated. But me, well, I didn't strike. Because of the lacking hours, the fault, the credit to pay, all this. (...) Yes, the union told me to strike that day. But, you know, maybe today they ask you to do some overtime, but maybe tomorrow they won't ask you anything anymore. If you want to do the strike, you have to be ready to do only your regular hours and that's all. But, someone who makes his living from doing overtime, like me, no, that's destiny. Because, my normal wage only covers the credit taxes for the flat. (...) Inside, I would have liked to participate. It's important to support the strike. There are so many problems, lacking staff and hours. But I just can't. That's my problem, a personal problem. You see, my colleagues are Italians, they have their parents here to

support them. But I don't. All my family is in Egypt, my wife still has to come here, I have to pay the flat, and I'm all on my own. This is a really different situation.

(...)

G06: Whether the strikes have an effect on the work? In my opinion, in general, no. Because, because, if I don't do the strike, well, they ask me before: 'There's going to be the strike, will you participate?' In this way, everything gets organised. Before doing a strike, you know, unions have to communicate this. And then the department heads know this before, and they can organise, they can ask you. (...)

Int: In your opinion, then, do the unions have any power to change something?

G06: In the last strikes, I think yes, the union had a chance to oppose the firm, to change something. Because so many colleagues participated. Really a lot. Maybe management tells us that the strike had no effect, because anyway they already had made 13% of turnover more during the last year. But, they only say so. You can see it from their faces. (...) The goal of a strike should be this, to put the firm into some difficulties, to remember the value of the workers. Last Saturday, during the strike, they had to call 5 or 6 directors from other shops, to cover up the holes. You know, 5 or 6 directors!

(G06-pps-mya-cgil)

### **Regarding chapter 9.4. Participation in institutional interest representation 3: Individualised concepts of collective support and struggles**

Int: Would you say there is solidarity among colleagues?

C15: Well, no, I think solidarity really doesn't exist here. It's everybody on his own. Unfortunately.

Int: Even though you've said before that there would be good personal relations?

C15: Yes, ok, with these colleagues, yes, maybe there is. But among 100 we are only 5 or 6 with some solidarity then

(C15/female permanent part-time cashier).

Int: What kind of experience has this been to engage in this legal action?

C15: It's been an ugly experience, hard stuff. Because, after one and a half years that you had worked there, that you'd always given all your soul into your work, being left at home like that has been a really ugly experience. Also because others did get permanent contracts without problems, even if they had not been so available, and even after we had been left at home. (...) I don't know how to interpret all this, if there is a firm strategy or not.. I would rather say: it's all a big injustice. It's ugly to see yourself being outrun like this.

(...)

Int: When you decided to do the trial, were you afraid to be put on a black list by management?

C15: No, honestly, we've had a lot of fear. But, in reality, it hasn't been like this. Because, we did struggle for something we deserved. So, it has been stupid to think that we would end up on a black list. And even if this would have happened: patience.

Shop steward: From their point of view, they were in a big advantage, because it's been all people who wanted to work there. People who always had good relations with everybody, who had always been available, well educated, good workers. Even if you go to court, under such preconditions the probability to be badly received is very low

(C15/female permanent part-time cashier).

C28: I don't have any conflicts with superiors, never had. On the contrary: We thought maybe to enter into bad harmony after the trial. But no, relations even have gotten better afterwards. When we came back, they even did kind of a speech for us. I never would have expected this: That they were pleased to have us here, all these things

(C28/female permanent part-time cashier).

### **Regarding chapter 9.5 Participation in institutional interest representation 4: Active participation and collective struggle attitudes**

I21: Yes, up to now, I've always joined all the union assemblies, when I had nothing else to do really. I always stopped by, listened, asked some questions about things I didn't understand completely.

*Int: When you had nothing else to do, you mean at work?*

*I21: Yes, yes. But, I never went outside with them. Yes, sometimes, for example with L. + M. (shop stewards) I went to Assisi, for the demonstration. Because, I'm a social person. (...) I think, the union activities here in our shop are a very positive thing, because, each time I've had a problem and I've talked to the shop stewards, in the end, I've obtained something from the firm. So, for me that's a positive thing. They really do a good job, the shop stewards here. Sure, you can't always get everything you want. But, something, however, they've managed to bring home for us  
(I21/male permanent part-time warehousemen).*

*Int: Do you mean there is little solidarity?*

*G09: Very, very little solidarity. For example, it's always me who is sent from the cash desk to help fill the shelves if there is a need. This extra-work is never distributed in an equal way. (...) As I said, I entered the union (became shop steward) to do big struggles, a big struggle, not these small conflicts that destroy your image. Because that one has a migraine, the other one doesn't want to stay at the cash desks  
(G09/male permanent full-time cashier).*

*I21: I can't start a struggle in here. Because, I am only a drop in the ocean. Because I'm different, I'm an immigrant (migrant from outside the EU), I'm not Italian. We are in really different situations with different interests  
(I21/male permanent part-time warehousemen).*

*D14: There is not much of talking with colleagues. There is a lot of turnover. There is no confidence, no trust with all of them, also if you interact with everybody. But there is not enough trust to talk with everybody about these things (the struggles she did). (...) For me, the colleagues are not really important, to say the truth. But, because they are so far away from my life. We have really different interests, even if there are splendid persons. They are all so young, they have different lives. With someone, in contrast, yes there is, because we even meet outside, with some ex-colleagues of my age  
(D14/female permanent part-time cashier).*

### ***Regarding chapter 9.6 Collective agency at the shop floor: Personalised and privatised forms of daily solidarity***

*C16: (...)Then, you form your little group with certain people, and you leave aside the others.*

*Int: And, does this go beyond work, too?*

*C16: Yes, for me yes. I have some friendships here, friends I meet often during the week, we go out together, for dinner, or on a daytrip, yes, yes.(...) Yes, I feel linked to my work. As I said before, it's because I like this kind of work. And on top of it, there are these friendships, well, it has become like a family  
(C-C16/female permanent part-time cashier).*

*G05: At our workplace, with the young guys, there really is a good relation among us, with the other guys, us youngsters, I mean.*

*Int: Is age so important in this?*

*G05: Yes, absolutely, for me it is very important, for getting along well together  
(G05/male permanent part-time sales clerk).*

*I20: The atmosphere among colleagues really changed. When I came here, I was among the young ones, I had 25 years. Now, with 32, I'm among the oldest. There are so many young colleagues now, they are all university students, we are talking about 20 years old people here, maybe 25. As for the older people, you can count them with one hand only. There is less contact, less relations now, because we have less common points. It's more difficult to interact, then: interests are different, the places we go to are different, we have different lifestyles. In consequence, also our arguments and what we talk about, become different (I20/male permanent part-time stock operator).*

## Erklärung

Hiermit erkläre ich, dass ich diese Arbeit ohne unerlaubte Hilfe angefertigt, keine anderen als die angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmittel benutzt und alle aus den benutzten Werken wörtlich oder inhaltlich entnommenen Stellen als solche kenntlich gemacht habe.

Kristin Carls